

"CAN TWO WALK TOGETHER UNLESS THEY BE AGREED?"  
THE ORIGINS OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS, 1800-1840

By

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*Sola Deo Gloria!*

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This study offers a new interpretation of a major split in the Baptist denomination during a time of religious reorganization and revival in America. Historians of the antission or Primitive Baptists have tried to explain the divisions on sectional, political, economic and social grounds. Unfortunately, their efforts remove the Primitive Baptists from the context of religious and doctrinal changes sweeping through American denominations during these decades. In fact, this study argues, theological and doctrinal issues were central to the conflict which produced the Primitive Baptist sect.

The Primitive Baptist sect arose out of a conflict between supporters and opponents of home and foreign missions among American Baptists in the period 1810-1840. The controversy split churches across the South and West, with a large minority of ministers and church members forming churches which opposed

participation in missionary organizations, the establishment of theological schools, and other benevolent organizations which had been organized by evangelicals in the early 1800s.

Coming out of a primitivist tradition in Reformed Christianity, the Primitive Baptists formulated a comprehensive argument against various new measures for evangelism and social reform in the early 1800s. They held that missions and other religious organizations except for the local church were unscriptural human innovations. They believed that the advocates of missions were engaged in commercializing religion through their constant appeals for money and their basing membership on level of contribution rather than on religious experience. The Primitive Baptists saw themselves as the latest defenders of the pure gospel order. They argued that other churches, because of their origins in the Reformation out of the Roman Catholic Church, were not in fact true churches. They taught a form of apostolic succession, pointing to what they argued were churches in every era of church history which preserved and defended the primitive church order from human traditions developed in the early post-apostolic period.

The leaders and members who followed them out of missionary Baptist churches across the South and West were protesting developments within churches and denominations they saw at variance with Scripture. In doing so they articulated a critique of institutionalization in American Christianity, the move of the evangelical church from protesting to adopting society's opinions concerning money and social status, and the correct means of saving the lost. In each of these areas they expressed on a popular level the fears of many conservative theologians such as the Old-School

Presbyterians and John Nevin in the German Reformed Church. While they differed on many particulars, the Primitive Baptists shared with other conservatives almost identical concerns about the effect the new measures of evangelicalism would have on the church and its members. The Primitive Baptists, in the end, expressed the fears of many believers in and out of the Baptist denomination over the direction that American Christianity was taking in the early years of the new republic.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS AND AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY, 1800-1840.

This study offers a new interpretation of a major split in the Baptist church during a time of religious reorganization and revival in America. Historians of the antislavery or Primitive Baptists have tried to explain the divisions on sectional, political, economic and social grounds. Unfortunately, their efforts remove the Primitive Baptists from the context of religious and doctrinal changes sweeping through American denominations during these decades.<sup>1</sup>

The interpretation of the Primitive Baptist movement in the early nineteenth century has two major elements. Historians have traditionally classified the entire antislavery movement as an expression of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian protests against the designs of social and economic elites. The rapid process of institutionalization of American Christianity, the argument goes, bred hostility towards Northern and Eastern ministers and elite lay leaders in the various denominations. Older ministers in the West and South saw a threat to their livelihoods from younger, more educated ministers coming into their communities at the behest of societies and boards based in

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terms. Baptist groups which opposed missions went by a number of names, some given to them by their opponents: Hard-shells, Black Rockers, Kehukeites, antislavery Baptists, Old School Baptists, and Primitive Baptists. I have followed modern convention of using the term Primitive Baptist, even when referring



New York City to “christianize the heathen.” Lay people resented the constant appeals for money from the boards. In reaction, the antission movement led hundreds of local churches out of the major Baptist denomination in the late 1820s and 1830s. More recent historians have examined the Primitive Baptists and the larger antission movement within the context of a broader primitivist or restorationist dimension in American religious life. While both approaches help us understand the rise of the Primitive Baptists, they give slight attention to the specific historical and doctrinal background of the movement.<sup>2</sup>

Of the works on the antission movement, only Nathan Hatch, Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Richard T. Hughes take seriously theological or doctrinal factors. Most historians of the movement see these as secondary to social or economic causes and are in fact dismissive of the intellectual foundations of the Primitive Baptists. William Warren Sweet asserts that “opposition to missions and education developed

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to Baptist writers against missions who made their arguments before the rise of the Primitive Baptist sect.

<sup>2</sup> For the social, economic, political and sectional interpretation of the Primitive Baptist or antission movement see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Antission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture,” *Journal of Southern History* 36:4(Nov. 1970): 501-509; William W. Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (New York: 1952), 273-275; Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1830* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 58-76; Walter B. Posey, *Religious Strife on the Southern Frontier* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1965), 12-22; Posey, *The Baptist Church in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1776-1845* (Lexington: 1957), 68-79; T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 145-158; Byron C. Lambert, *The Rise of the Antission Movement, 1800-1840* (PhD. Dissertation); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity 1790-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 176-179. On the primitivist, restorationist perspective on the Primitive Baptists see Richard T. Hughes, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 90-92.

first on the [social and economic] grounds mentioned... and then a doctrine was evolved to uphold that position,” and that “the unevangelical type of Calvinism which it fostered led to bigotry and intolerance.”<sup>3</sup> T. Scott Miyakawa states that the theological arguments of Primitive Baptists against missions “were essentially symptoms or . . . rationalizations after the fact.” “The extreme predestinarians, as the poorer and less-educated elements, were more likely to need compensating rationalizations for their unfavorable status.” “For the antimissionists,” Miyakawa concludes, “predestinarianism as a compensating belief perhaps belonged to the same category as modern racism, which often gives the less-favored classes of one race a feeling of superiority over another race . . . and an extreme isolationism which creates in other less-favored people similar illusions of superiority over ‘foreigners.’”<sup>4</sup> Wyatt-Brown, however, states that “Theological objections to the mission scheme . . . served as more than merely convenient screens to hide social and economic misgivings.” Unlike Sweet and Miyakawa, Wyatt-Brown does explore the historical and doctrinal background of the Primitive Baptists. In doing so, however, he places too great an emphasis on their Hypercalvinism as the intellectual foundation for their opposition to missions. Their strict adherence to predestination and the sovereignty of God in salvation did contribute somewhat to their arguments against missions, but not to the extent historians have claimed. Of those who have dealt with the Primitive Baptists only Hughes talks about the Primitive Baptists as part of a stream of primitivism in American Christianity.

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<sup>3</sup> Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 74-75, 76

<sup>4</sup> Miyakawa, 154, 157-58.

Contrary to current historical opinion, the dispute over missions centered not on political, social, sectional or economic factors but on religious issues. To be sure, the Primitive Baptists often used the language of politics and economics to animate their case against missions. Their opposition to new methods of evangelism and a host of new institutions centered on doctrinal issues, the roots of which were to be found earlier in Baptists history. Baptist ministers and laymen had long argued among themselves over issues of salvation, ecclesiastical organizations, and the role of social status in the churches since the eighteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, many of the disputes appeared resolved. By 1800 American Baptists had become numerically stronger and more united than they had been a century earlier. A unity based on commonly-held primitivist assumptions hid cultural squabbles within Baptist churches arising out of the competition between older, more conservative Regular Baptists and the newer, revivalist Separate Baptists. As the conflict over missions revealed, the primitivist assumptions proved inadequate under the stresses and strains experienced by a rapidly developing denomination in the spiritual hothouse that was America before 1830.

Several aspects of the American Christian experience presented the Primitive Baptists with a challenge to their traditional beliefs and practices. These were religious pluralism, the changing nature of revivals, and the rise of religious individualism as a fact of American religious life. In confronting these issues, the Primitive Baptists were not alone. There were other opponents to these developments. For example, the Stone-Campbellites also opposed missions and claimed strict adherence to the New Testament for their faith and practice. They

parted company with the Primitive Baptists, however, on ecclesiastical and historical issues. For this reason the Primitive Baptists can only be tangentially linked to the restorationists. They were not restorationists because they saw themselves as the preservers of a remnant church in direct decent from the Apostolic church. As such, they took a 'high' view of the church to the extent of rejecting the concept of the visible church. It was their view of the nature and polity of the church, even more than their doctrines of salvation, which provided them with their major argument with the purveyors of the new methods the Primitive Baptists were much closer to what Walter Conser has called 'confessional theologians,' of which John Williamson Nevins and Phillip Schaff at Mercersburg Seminary in western Pennsylvania were the foremost American representatives.<sup>5</sup> In standing against the changing shape of American Christianity in the early nineteenth century, the Primitive Baptists were populist religious conservatives, defending tradition and conformity against innovation and pluralism.

One of the main problems facing American Christians in the early republic was the changing nature of religious pluralism. Jon Butler shows that pluralism had long existed in American society. The original English immigrants to the New World brought with them many forms of popular religiosity, both Christian and pre-Christian. Folk expressions of belief existed alongside the state church, sometimes clashing, sometimes peacefully coexisting.<sup>6</sup> The existing situation of popular pluralism became

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Conser, *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in Germany, England and America, 1815-1866* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 37-128.

more complex in the eighteenth century when a combination of ethnic immigration and revivalism added new sects and groups to the mix.<sup>7</sup> Pluralism, therefore, seems to have persisted in American religious life from settlement through the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The Revolution accelerated religious change by calling into question the traditional understandings of power, authority and order and expanded the circle of people who saw themselves as capable of thinking for themselves about these issues. “Respect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded,” Nathan Hatch argues. “Ordinary people moved toward these new horizons aided by a powerful new vocabulary, a rhetoric of liberty that would not have occurred to them were it not for the Revolution.”<sup>9</sup>

Disestablishment of the state-supported churches, as a consequence of the Revolution contributed to the rise of institutional pluralism in American Christianity in the late eighteenth century. In the ten years following independence, it appeared that a general establishment of Christianity by the new states would replace the specific establishment pattern of the colonial years. Rather than supporting specific denominations, the states provided general financial support for churches and affiliated organizations, sponsored the printing of religious materials, enforce laws against blasphemy, and insured a Christian magistracy by requiring test oaths for public office. The trend toward general establishment ended with the passage of Virginia’s religious freedom act which ended state support for religion. Within ten years, complete

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 164-193.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>9</sup> Hatch, 6.

Disestablishment became enshrined in the new National Constitution and the constitutions in most states.<sup>10</sup>

Disestablishment created a crisis of religious authority in the early republic. The state support for Christianity had provided stability and set the boundaries for orthodoxy beyond which it was unacceptable to venture. It had also provided the framework of Christianity in a real physical sense. In the South, the colonial establishment sacralized the landscape in the form of church buildings and burial grounds. Even dissenters benefited in a sense, because the sacralized landscape and presence of sacred institutions made it easier to win converts. Colonial records show that most of the converts to the Baptists and Methodists came out of existing churches or in areas where there was already a Christian presence. With Disestablishment, few formal institutions existed to protect doctrinal boundaries or serve as a Christian presence, especially in newly settled areas.

More than any other single denomination, the Baptists had led the way for disestablishment in the early republic. Their advocacy of religious freedom had been formed in the crucible of persecution by representatives of the established church. Yet the Baptists were also affected by the crisis of religious authority in the early republic. They found themselves competing for converts with other Christian denominations, primarily the Methodists, and battling the advocates of such heterodox doctrines as universalism and deism. In the fragmented religious situation of the early republic, many Baptists joined with those in other denominations in looking first to revivals and later to institution-building to preserve religious truth.

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, 260-263.

The southern ministers in particular who surveyed the region expressed the conviction that there was a general decline in religiosity in the 1790s. Rapid westward migration drained southern churches of their members, reducing their ability to support evangelism. In the thinly populated frontier areas, settlers who had religious affiliations in the older communities found distance from like-minded brethren a hindrance to forming churches. Religious feelings were vague and amorphous. A generalized Christianity prevailed, with institutional and sectarian lines and labels reduced in importance. Deism challenged orthodox Christianity even in the new settlements. Economic factors influenced the decline of religiosity, instilling a materialism which distracted most from thinking about spiritual matters. Each of these factors is cited by southern ministers as contributing to the declension evident in the region.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not there was a general decline in religiosity in the South is open to debate. Christianity had only a nominal hold on most of the region throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. More than likely, the declension felt by ministers was actually the disintegration of the religious establishment of the South in the face of Disestablishment and the crisis of religious authority present throughout the country. The popularity of deistic works, the rise of universalism, and the popular hostility to clerical authority (especially in the South and West) showed that there was a real

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<sup>11</sup> John Boles, in *The Great Revival 1797-1802: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), discusses the concerns of southern ministers across denominations over the religious state of their society. He concludes that these concerns stimulated a prayer movement of Christians seeking revival in the 1780s and 1790s, which culminated in the revivals beginning in Kentucky and moving throughout the south.

spiritual vacuum which many were waiting to fill.<sup>12</sup> The spur toward revival was part of the search for a solution to the problem of religious pluralism in the new republic. The revival had the unintended consequence, however, of exacerbating the institutional crisis of American Christianity.

The Great Revival and the Second Great Awakening were the formative religious events in nineteenth century America. The revivals contributed to an increase in piety and religious fervor throughout the country while at the same time stimulating religious institution building among Christians of all denominational stripes, including the Baptists. One of the ironies of this period is that denominationalization and institutionalization of evangelicalism arose at the same time as an intensely individualistic pietism came to the center of American religious experience. The individual's standing before God, his conversion, and his Christian life were the primary concern of evangelicals. Consequently, sectarian labels and doctrine were de-emphasized in the revival.<sup>13</sup> This individualism emphasized the church as a voluntary association made up of several persons paralleled the emerging concept of liberalism of the individual in politics and society. Because of this view, evangelicals emphasized salvation and viewed the church as a company of the saved. At the same time, the voluntary understanding of the church contributed to a devaluing of the church. Evangelicals willingly entered into non-denominational societies with other Christian believers. They downplayed creedal differences in favor of a broad-based

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<sup>12</sup> Hatch, 64; Butler, 257-58.

<sup>13</sup> Boles, 65-66. On the theology of individualism which came out of the revivals see *ibid.*, 125-141.



ecumenicism. The sharing of the platforms of revival meetings in Kentucky was the predecessor of the mixture of denominations represented on the boards of the major institutions of the benevolent empire.

The widespread founding of mission societies, theological colleges, bible societies, tract societies, Sunday schools and other benevolent agencies, along with the development of national denominational organizations were part of a process whereby Jeffersonian Americans shaped new understandings about the relationship of religion to society. The leaders sought to reassert their authority over spiritual matters by trying to recreate the coercive institutions which had defended established Christianity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and thus effectively re-establish and extend the reach of orthodox Christianity in American society.<sup>14</sup> Unlike state-supported churches, these new institutions competed for attention in a free spiritual market. Because of their size and influence, these new institutions drove the spiritual development of the nation in the early nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

These new institutions did not go unchallenged. Nathan Hatch has shown the “wave of popular religious movements that broke upon the United States in the half-century after independence,” a trend that brought with it a host of new sects and popular religious figures. These religious populists expressed themselves in the

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<sup>14</sup> The literature on these organizations is vast, but see especially Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1960); John R. Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Lois Banner, “Religious Benevolence as Social Control: A Critique of an Interpretation,” *Journal of American History* 40 (June 1973), 23-41.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, 268; 273-275.

popular idiom and opposed the pretensions of the ministerial elite. Some emerged as a direct consequence of the Great Revival in the South and West. Religious movements coming out of the Great Revival in the West and South are grouped under the label of “restorationists.” The restoration movement among frontier Christians took many forms, but none had the impact as the Christian movement, led first by Barton W. Stone and later absorbed by the ideas and teachings of Alexander Campbell. The Christians in the West sought to solve the problem of religious pluralism by downplaying of confessional distinctions and denominational labels, a trend growing out of the Revival. They complained that the churches were shackled by their own creeds, which expressed no more than the traditions of men, not the commands of god.<sup>16</sup>

The Stone-Campbellites sought to return to Scripture to reestablish the “ancient order of things.” Deeply influenced by Scottish Common Sense realism, Alexander Campbell interpreted Scripture inductively. By this means, he hoped to find the rules and guidelines upon which the primitive church could be restored. The Scriptures, therefore, were a constitution, rule book and procedural guide. Through their rationalist approach to scripture and church, they sought to discipline the chaotic religious culture of the American frontier.<sup>17</sup> Campbell decided that the problem of pluralism arose in the disagreements men had over the opinions of differing groups. By relying solely on the New Testament to return to the primitive order, Campbell

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<sup>16</sup> Hughes, 106-109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 117; 142-143. David Edwin Harrell, *Quest For a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 26-29.

foresaw the decline of sects and denominations. He anticipated a unification of Christians based on a pure, primitive New Testament faith.

Among the main targets of these populist primitivists were these new institutions. The Stone-Campbellites and other opponents of missions, however, criticized from outside the existing denominations.<sup>18</sup> They did not break from any existing denomination because of the development of new institutions. Indeed, opposition to the new institutions was not central to the restorationist's agenda. Leaders such as Stone and Campbell were committed to a program of recovery based on their rationalist approach to Scripture as a solution to the religious problems they saw in the country of their time. Their movement was an alternative response to the crisis of religious pluralism, an alternative which settled on the primitivist restoration of the ancient order as the ultimate solution.

The Primitive Baptists reacted to these developments in a much different way. Theirs was not a program of recovery and restoration, but one of preservation and defense. They were battling against the new methods of evangelization which swept through the churches in the early 1800s. They upheld strict doctrinal standards against the leveling influences of the Great Revival and the other revivals of the so-called Second Great Awakening. The new evangelicals, typified by Charles Finney, were

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<sup>18</sup> Hatch discusses the general anti-institutional movement among Christian populists which he describes as an assault on "Calvinist orthodoxy" See Hatch, 170-171. "The organization and rhetoric of the revolt against Calvinism remains elusive and neglected. Lacking the wealth, education and reputation of Calvinist leaders, the dissidents were self-consciously provincial, fiercely independent, and culturally marginal . . . . Despite these obstacles, dissident leaders were remarkably strong in challenging such Calvinist goals as home and foreign missions, the neglect of Sabbath observance, the education of ministers, and the forbidding of Sunday mails."

disregarding the doctrines that the Primitive Baptists held to so strongly. The revivalists introduced new methods into churches for the purpose of converting souls. They promoted the establishment of temperance organizations, moral reform societies, promoted sabbatarianism and other organizations meant to extend the effects of individual conversion to the reformation of society. In all of these, they challenged traditional ways of religious belief and activity.

Against these challenges and the competing claims of different denominations and sects, the Primitive Baptists asserted themselves as the true New Testament church, preserved from corruption throughout the centuries from the apostolic time to the present. As the body of the elect, they preserved the truth of Scripture and the models for polity and belief they contained. Rather than being restorationists such as the Stone-Campbellites, they were populist conservatives who held a high view of the visible church, who advocated a close adherence to Scriptural models of practice and who argued against new understandings and methods of obtaining conversion.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PRIMITIVIST DIMENSION IN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

In the early American republic, the restoration of the church to its primitive purity was a major theme among Christians. Nathan Hatch has shown the “wave of popular religious movements that broke upon the United States in the half-century after independence,” a wave that brought with it a host of new sects and popular religious figures. These religious populists expressed themselves in the popular idiom and opposed the pretensions of the ministerial elite. Some emerged as a direct consequence of the Great Revival in the South and West. Religious movements coming out of the Great Revival in the South and West are grouped by historians under the label “restorationsists.” The restoration movement found its expression in the Christians or Stone-Campbellites, led first by Barton W. Stone and later absorbed by the ideas and teachings of Alexander Campbell. The Primitive Baptists, on the other hand, arose as a reaction to changes going on within the Baptist denomination, specifically the formation of the national Baptist Board of Foreign Missions and calls for other denominational institutions such as theological schools. These institutions, in the minds of the Primitive Baptists, violated the express writ of scripture and Baptist tradition. The writings of Primitive Baptist leaders clearly indicate that they did not

see themselves as restoring anything. Rather, they were defending traditional ways of Baptist thinking and practice. The origins of this defense lay in a long history of Christian primitivism rooted in the Reformed theology of John Calvin and developed in its fullest expressions by the Puritans of sixteenth and seventeenth century England and New England and the Baptists of eighteenth and early nineteenth century America.

Primitivism in its anthropological sense can take one of two forms—chronological or cultural. Chronological primitivism usually looks to a specific point in the past as its normative reference. Usually they conceive of this beginning point as a “golden age” of purity and truth when the gods constructed the forms of human society that exist. At some point in the past a cataclysm occurred which led to the end of the golden age. The subsequent times of human history are seen as a decline from purity. At some point in the future there will be seen a restoration of man’s primal goodness. This restoration will occur through one of two ways: either the sudden entrance into human history by the divine, or the recognition by men of the superiority of their primitive life and a voluntary attempt to restore it as close approximation.<sup>1</sup> The other form of primitivism is cultural, “the discontent of the civilized with civilization,” and the desire for the simpler life of the primitives. This may be combined with chronological primitivism, but not necessarily.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In both cultural and chronological primitivism there is a strong emphasis on the separation between the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual world and the material world. Primitive societies, according to Mircea Eliade in his seminal work on the topic *The Sacred and the Profane*, live close to the sacred because to them the sacred is equivalent to power or, more so, to reality. In this perspective, religious man needs a specific way to bring order out of chaos—that is, to approach the divine. Such order cannot emerge out of the chaos of the profane but has to exist as wholly other, standing outside and protected from any contact with the profane or material world.<sup>3</sup> Traditional societies characteristically keep a strict separation between the territory they inhabit and the surrounding space. The former is the “world,” the “cosmos.” Everything beyond the established boundaries is not part of the world but is instead a chaotic, unorganized, and ultimately threatening space inhabited by ghosts, demons, or “foreigners.” The cosmos is because it came into existence through divine action or is currently in communication with the world of the gods. “The world,” Eliade says, “is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself.”

The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 12-13; 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

The sacred is not indeterminate. It is not an uncreated constant but has a specific origin at a specific point in the past. This primal time of origins is “the time of the cosmogony,” the instant that the sacred came into existence. Archaic men do not speak so much of the creation of the natural world as they do the establishment of the spiritual order. It is sacred because it deals with the divine, with the actions of God or the gods. “Cosmogenic time serves as the model for all sacred times.”<sup>5</sup> As such, the cosmogony is the paradigmatic model for all human activity which seeks contact with the spiritual realm.

The cosmogony becomes paradigmatic as it is encapsulated and retold in a group’s myth. It is the myth of a group that relates its sacred history, a record of the primordial event that took place at the beginning of time and initiated the cosmos. The actors in the myth are not human but divine beings whose activities would have remained hidden from men were they not revealed in the myth. The myth speaks “only of reality, of what *really* happened, of what was fully manifested.” The myth establishes what is real because it is a retelling of sacred events.

Everything that the gods or the ancestors did, hence everything that the myths have to tell about their creative activity, belongs to the sphere of the sacred and therefore participates in being. In contrast, what men do on their own initiative, what they do without a mythical model, belongs to the sphere of the profane; hence it is a vain and illusionary activity, and, in the last analysis, unreal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 96; see also Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 5-6.



The myth makes the cosmos comprehensible to the group which holds the myth. But what occurs when the myth is abandoned or discarded?

The perspective [of religious man] changes completely when the sense of *the religiousness of the cosmos being lost*. This is what occurs when, in certain highly evolved societies, the intellectual elites purposely detach themselves from the patterns of traditional religion. The primordial sanctification of cosmic time then proves useless and without meaning....When it is no longer a vehicle for reinterpreting a primordial situation, and hence for recovering the mysterious presence of the gods, that is, *when it is desacralized*, cyclic time becomes terrifying.<sup>7</sup>

Eliade's description helps us understand the limits of primitivism as a primary intellectual or theological force. When the paradigmatic myth of a group is challenged, the group is forced into a defensive position. The primitivist holds onto the elements of the myth which are under direct attack, often to the exclusion of other elements. The boundaries between the sacred and the profane are drawn even tighter. The profane or material world is seen as everything which is not expressly described by the myth. Defending groups become isolationist and apocalyptic; those who challenge the paradigmatic myth are seen as having joined the enemy in the chaotic space outside their orderly universe.

Eliade points out two key aspects of primitivism. The first concerns myth and history. For the primitivist, the reference for their action is their past—not their historical but their mythic past. They seek a restoration to primitive goodness and purity. Through the maintenance and close following of patterns laid down in the

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<sup>7</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 107.

paradigmatic myths, the primitivist attempts to reverse time and return to the time of origins, eradicating the decay resulting from the fall from the pure models. The second aspect is the division between sacred and profane. There are sacred acts and institutions, those which were formed by divine action in the golden age. On the other hand, there are profane acts and institutions were the creation of men. Both the conception of mythic time and the division of the world between sacred and profane formed the foundation for Christian primitivism arising out of the Reformation and later expressed in the writings of the Primitive Baptists.

Christianity, according to Eliade, does not fit in well with his descriptions of primitive religion. The events chronicled in the scriptures did not take place in cosmic time, but in historical time. The incarnation of Christ is a historical event that is framed within human history. Christians remember the events of Christ's life in worship, but these recreate events that took place in history, not in a mythic past.<sup>8</sup>

The form of Christianity Eliade recognizes is a specific form, one which might best be called the ontological form. Ontological Christianity addresses the question, "How can I relate to God?" How can I find His grace and Mercy. Ontological Christianity is primarily liturgical, concerned first and foremost with placing man in the sacred by providing him a conduit to God through the use of material objects. Ritual acts and objects act as means of grace, as channels of the spirit of God by which man can have knowledge of God. The division between the sacred and the profane is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 111.

blurred in worship, because man-made objects are conceived as capable of becoming endowed with divine power. Man needs the use of objects to know God because God is ultimately unknowable. Through ritual, through man-made objects, man can bring God down to a level which he can easily understand. Immanence and transcendence are overcome, and this world becomes the realm of the sacred.

The reassertion of God's transcendence and immanence, the restoration of the division between the sacred and the profane, is the primary interest of Cosmological Christianity. Eliade does not recognize this stream in the history of Christian thought. Had he, he would have recognized many parallels between the primitive religions he describes and this form of Christianity arising out of the Reformation. Cosmological, or Primordial Christianity, is concerned first and foremost with the recovery, preservation, and re-creation of the pure order of the church as revealed in Scripture. While describing historical events, Scripture, because of its status as sacred writ, sacralizes the events. The people and events recounted there take on mythic qualities, mythic in the sense of paradigmatic. Beyond this, Scripture as a whole is paradigmatic, providing the patterns for proper practice, worship, doctrines and experiences. In the Reformed tradition, the emphasis on sovereign decrees before time is what gives the patterns of the apostolic period their sacred, and therefore true, quality. Because they were decreed by God and not decided on by man, the forms and titles of the church are fixed. Primordial Christians in their reform of the church sought to recover from the apostolic period of origins, through careful study of the

Scriptures, the pure church. The primary representative of this tradition are those churches influenced by Calvinism.

John Calvin's theology of worship is important in understanding the origins of the primitivist impulse which later gave rise to the Primitive Baptists. For Calvin, the central part of the reform of the church was the reformation of worship. In attempting to restore to the church the pure forms and rites contained in Scripture, Calvin formulated a theology of worship on a metaphysical basis which reasserted the division between sacred and profane.

Calvin defended the Reformed opposition to Catholic piety by forging a new, scripturally based metaphysic, one which clearly defined the boundary between the spiritual and material (sacred and profane) world. Late medieval religion sought to blur the distinction between the two realms through the use of images. Medieval piety strived to reduce the infinite to the finite and blended the holy and the profane. So successful was this that by the late 15<sup>th</sup> century the people of Western Europe ran the risk of "confusing the spiritual and the temporal, the sacred and the profane."<sup>9</sup> Against this, Calvin asserted the principle *finitum non est capax infiniti* (the finite cannot contain the infinite) to defend God's transcendence.<sup>10</sup> Calvin's theology of worship based on this principle sharply distinguished between the spiritual and the material, between those acts of worship which were ordained by God and prescribed in his word

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<sup>9</sup> Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

and those which were strictly the invention of man. Under the former heading fell preaching, psalm singing, prayer, and the administration of Baptist and Lord's Supper; under the latter were the Mass, relics, vestments, statuary, and the other trappings of medieval Catholicism. Calvin criticized these trappings, saying that God, being spiritual, could not be known through man-made objects. God's spirit operated in the church and in the hearts of men, not through holy water, saint's wristbones, or stone statues. Such objects were endowed by man with sacredness and were created by him because he, in his fallen condition, refused to approach God in the ways he demanded.<sup>11</sup>

Man's approach to God had to be based on this metaphysical understanding because it was the way God had prescribed in Scripture. Calvin held that there was one reality. Knowing this involves understanding that there is a fundamental division between the material and the spiritual world and that one cannot approach the spiritual through the material. In Calvin's system, the material world "is definitely real, but only in a contingent, finite way." It operates according to its own laws as determined and directed by God, but it in no way serves to mediate the infinite. Man's creations in the material realm are not necessarily evil; there is nothing inherently evil about the material. Indeed, man can use his God-given creativity in the material realm to glorify God. But they cannot be used by man to approach God.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 201-202; 206-208; 213-216.

Carlos Eire, in his path-breaking work on the Reformed attitude towards religious images and relics, summarizes the contribution Calvin's theology made to Christian primitivism.

The problem on which Calvin focuses is the endemic corruption of human nature and the fact that the material world itself is not evil. Religion is a human phenomenon, a human response to the reality of God, but since men are corrupt, religion, too, shares in this corruption. Because they try to reverse the order of creation by attempting to bring God down to their level, men are inherently idolatrous. By stressing this point as a universal rule, Calvin makes idolatry an ever-present danger . . . . In juxtaposing the objective reality of God with the infinite number of subjective opinion that fallen humans create about Him, Calvin makes it a doctrine that men are metaphysically deranged, naturally inclined to reverse the order of things. Idolatry, then, is a permanent condition of the human race.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin's reassertion of the separation between the spiritual and the material provided the foundation for Anglo-American Puritanism. The attacks against the rites of the Church of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and calls for a return to the purity of the ancient church arose out of the idea of separation of the spiritual and material in worship. The Separatists and Independents, those strains of English Puritanism which held that the Church of England was so corrupt that removal from it was the only way to restore the primitive order, carried Calvin's metaphysic to its logical conclusion. The very structures of the church at that time, with the hierarchical arrangements of priests, bishops, Archbishops and King, blurred the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Reform of the church meant rejecting

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 232

all human invention in church life and the re-creation of religion along those lines clearly defined in Scripture.

This further development of Calvin's metaphysic is important, because it shows how the division of the spiritual from the material had applicability beyond his immediate intent to reform worship. The material came to be understood as encompassing all aspects of man's creative activity. Anything related to the sacred had to be formed or instituted in accord with spiritual models.

It was in New England that the primitivist desire to form churches more closely in accord with Scriptural models emerged into a fully articulated primordial reform program. Theodore Dwight Bozeman's study of the primitivism of New England puritans, *To Live Ancient Ways*, discusses the New England Puritan as primordial reformer. These, more so than their Continental or English Reformed counterparts, exemplified Lovejoy and Boas description of the primitive reformer.

A mood of intense dissatisfaction with some or all of the characteristics of the civilized life of one's own time will obviously produce in some minds a hie and an endeavor to put an end to them. Thus, as has already been remarked, primitivism need not be, and often has not been, hostile to a certain faith in progress. But when it has been converted into a practical program it has necessarily been a program of reform wholly through elevation and reversion. The way to improve society . . . is to undo the work of history, to scrape off from human life the accretion which have grown upon it.<sup>13</sup>

While Calvin and his English counterparts reflected some of the program of primitive reform, circumstances limited their ability to fully return to the ancient order found in

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<sup>13</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, 16

the New Testament. A complete stoppage of history, of reversion to an earlier time, was only possible in a pristine environment. Such a place was New England. In that setting, Calvin's primitivist separation of the spiritual from the material and his spiritual descendant's attempts to reform and restore the apostolic church grew into a fully developed primitivism which would inform that of the Baptists.

Bozeman argues that New England Puritans based their primitivism on the understanding of Scripture as myth. As in the traditional societies Eliade describes, the Puritan's myth was paradigmatic. "Myth," Bozeman writes in accord with Eliade, "describes a narrative of events that occurred in an elite, long-ago Great, or Strong, time in human and divine history." For the Puritan, their great time, the paradigmatic time of origins was the "age of wonders" recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. That age took on mythic qualities because, while the Puritans had no doubt that the Bible described actual events, these events were nevertheless divided from ordinary human history. "It was the normative time to which the men and women of the present must, in their imagination, 'return' for saving guidance and empowerment."<sup>14</sup> In their understanding of Scripture, the Puritans added a horizontal element to Calvin's vertical element by dividing time into sacred and profane. Scripture and the history contained in its pages was both spiritual and sacred. Spiritual, because it offered the devout the pure, God-ordained way of worshipping Him, of organizing His Church, and of knowing Him. Sacred, because it described the

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<sup>14</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension of Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 14.



actions of God in the normative, paradigmatic time of origins.<sup>15</sup> Out of this matrix emerged a discernible primitivist pattern in New England Puritanism which Bozeman describes as consisting of ten basic elements.<sup>16</sup>

(1) Exalted, mythic status of the biblical era. The Puritans acknowledged little historical distance between their own time and the time of beginnings recorded in the Bible. They viewed all church history beyond the times of the Apostles as darkness and loss.

(2) The scriptural record of biblical events was not mere chronicle. Events were not truly remote. They were dramatic, engrossing, and hence contemporary. The Puritans viewed sacred writ as best experienced as living theater. Biblical narratives, they felt, were immediate to the experience of the present age.

(3) Biblical events were elevated to the realm of the Sacred and constituted a continual theophany (revelation of God's presence in the world), a parade of religious heroes suffused with supernatural presence and power. Miracles, prophecies and infallible teachings were organic to this time.

(4) Sacred events were equated with simplicity.

(5) Biblical patterns were pure, flowing directly from their divine source uninterrupted by human influence.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33-39.

<sup>16</sup> The following discussion is taken from Ibid., 15-18.

(6)The Biblical world was depicted as a display of authoritative archetypes for redemptively significant human activities in the post-biblical era. If in mythical time all experience was universal experience, then mythic acts were universal acts. This did not mean that primordial action was to be imitative. Only divinely specified, generalizable, and significant action was to be designated as a mandatory pattern or example. Among these were the forms of worship, the structure and government of the church, and the formulas of conversion.

(7)The Biblical world of saving origins was comprehended as an order of completed perfection.

(8)The intellect's application to religious matters was restricted by the patterns derived from Scripture. Any thought or doctrine which fell outside their acknowledged sacred patterns threatened the ways of knowing provided by sacred writ.

(9)Puritans saw the historical career of the Christian church as one of progressive decline as man over the centuries rejected the vision of Biblical finality. Over that time, human invention had eclipsed the normative patterns of the Gospel and the apostolic age.

(10)Because of this decline from purity, restoration of the primitive church order was the primary task of Protestant Christians.

With the New England Puritans, Christian primitivism attained its most complex formulation. The period from Calvin to the New England Puritans saw the evolution of the former's primitivist metaphysics into a full-fledged program of reform.

While this reform program failed, the view of Scripture as a record of paradigmatic and authoritative archetypes, the belief that the Christian church had declined from apostolic purity, the rejection of human invention in religious acts, and a sense of the duty to recover and perpetuate the primitive church remained as continual themes in American Christianity for at least two centuries. No other single denomination exemplified the persistence of Christian primitivism in American religious life as the Baptists.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS

By the middle of the seventeenth century, England had a significant number of Baptist churches. Divided into two groups, the General Baptist and the Particular Baptists, they contributed members to the earliest churches in the New World. Records show Baptist churches scattered throughout the colonies in the seventeenth century. The earliest Baptist churches were in New England, where their sharp opposition to the state church and to infant baptism earned them the wrath of the Congregational authorities. Rhode Island, founded on the principle of religious toleration, was the only colony in New England with a significant Baptist presence in the seventeenth century. Baptist presence in the Southern states was established late in the century with the founding of a congregation in Charleston, but there is evidence of a few General Baptist churches in Virginia and North Carolina. The strongest Baptist churches in the early period settled in the Delaware Valley, where the relative toleration of the Middle Colonies allowed dissenting religious groups to flourish. Colonial churches at the time were marked by a great diversity of doctrine, with

General and Particular Baptists often worshiping together and just as often coming into conflict over different issues.<sup>1</sup>

These early churches were expressions of the primitivist drive among Baptists from England and Wales. While they disputed specific ideas, such as the nature of the atonement, the laying on of hands after baptism, and exclusive psalmody in worship, all had in common the desire to restore the church to the model they found in the New Testament. The primitivist influence arose early among English Baptists, arising from its roots in Separatism. The influence of primitivism persisted in the eighteenth century among both the Regular and the Separate Baptists.<sup>2</sup> Beginning as rival groups, they had united into common associations by the early 1800s partly because of their common commitment to the primitive church. The amalgamation of the beliefs and practices of these two groups contributed to the ideas of both Primitive and Missionary Baptists.

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of Baptists in seventeenth century America, see H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 123-150. On the Baptists in early New England, see Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 93-125.

<sup>2</sup> The primitivist impulse among English Baptists has not been carefully studied. See the suggestive comments in Hughes, 82. Baptists in England developed out of Separatism, over the issue of infant baptism. On the history of the English Baptists see McBeth, 21-63; B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 116-141; Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters, Volume I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 221-280; Henry W. Clark, *History of English Nonconformity* vol. 1. (London: 1911), 300-308.

Originating with the Particular Baptists of England, the Regular Baptists in America developed real strength in the Delaware Valley area. In 1707, these churches took the first steps towards the creation of a Baptist denomination by forming themselves into the Philadelphia Baptist Association. Here was a significant departure from their English brethren, who had failed miserably at the task of forming their individual churches into associations. Though the name may not so indicate, the Philadelphia Association acted as a national body. The association corresponded with and counted as members churches as far away as North Carolina and Maine. Itinerant preachers spread out from Philadelphia throughout the colonies bringing the Regular Baptist's mixture of confessionalism, associationism (the idea that local churches should form regional organizations for common purposes), and Calvinism into individual Baptist churches. They were particularly adept at this, bringing many associations that had been Arminian in doctrine over to the side of Calvinism.<sup>3</sup>

The Philadelphia Association demonstrated a desire to preserve doctrinal purity as well as desire to preserve primitive ways as revealed in the New Testament. Toward both ends the Regular Baptists developed a careful pattern of faith and practice which they sought to perpetuate through a strong creedalism. Doctrinally, the Association strove for conformity among member churches through the adoption of the London Confession of 1689 in modified form as the official statement of doctrine

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<sup>3</sup> McBeth, 211; 239-242. On the activities of missionaries and ministers in other colonies, see *Ibid.*, 219-220; 223. The Philadelphia Association's "reform" of the General Baptist churches in North Carolina is discussed in George W. Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists*, Vol. 1 (Raleigh, 1930), 204-223.

for member churches in 1742. The resulting Philadelphia Confession of Faith was the major statement of Baptist doctrine for American churches until the mid-1800s. Church order became established and uniform with the adoption of *A Short Treatise of Church Discipline* in 1743, later modified in 1798. These documents, along with the published minutes of the Association meetings, established the doctrines and practices of the Regular Baptist churches in the Colonies.<sup>4</sup>

The published documents of the Association reflect the biblicism which underlay Baptist doctrines. A scrupulous conformity to the primitive order as revealed in Scripture marked Regular Baptist statements concerning the church. For all of their concern with written creeds and disciplines, Regulars saw these as subordinate to Scripture. The first chapter of the *Confession of Faith* stated that God revealed himself and his will to the church, and afterwards to commit it to writing. Hence, "the Holy Scriptures is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible Rule of all Saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience." Scripture was to serve as the supreme judge in all controversies and the standard by which all human writings were to be judged.<sup>5</sup> All statements made in the *Confession* and in the statements of discipline did not stand on their own; rather they stood on the solid foundation of Scripture. For them, as for

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<sup>4</sup> Robert T. Hardy, "The Philadelphia Tradition," in Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, (Philadelphia, 1959), 31-33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

other primitivists, Scripture was prescriptive. All aspects of Christian life and practice were based on the express writ and models contained in the New Testament.

One aspect of the Christian life which reflects this normative concern was the Regular Baptists understanding of the nature of the Church. They were particularly church-centered in their orientation. While they had a strong associationalism, they did not see the associations they participated in as superceding the authority of the local church. The local church was not a man-made institution; it was a God-ordained institution. As the *Discipline of 1798* put it “a gospel church consists of such persons, as have been called out of a state of nature into a state of grace, called with an effectual calling, called out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God’s dear Son, or are judged in charity to be so called.”<sup>6</sup> The Minutes of the Association reflects this doctrine throughout. For example, in an answer to a 1752 query by a member church over whether a person who denied the doctrines of election, original sin, and perseverance of the saints could remain in full communion, the Association answered negatively then went on to assert: “Upon which fundamental doctrines of Christianity, next to the belief of an eternal God, our faith must rest; and we adopt, and would that all the churches belonging to the Baptist Association be well grounded in accordance to our Confession of faith and catechism, and cannot allow that any are true member of our churches who deny the said principles.” Church members were to be elect persons who gave sufficient evidence of their regeneration and received baptism by

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 35.



immersion as a sign of their conversion.<sup>7</sup> People who offered no such evidence, or who rejected the basic doctrines upheld by the church, could not be considered members.

The elements of exclusivity in their idea of the church led the Regular Baptists to draw back from cooperation with other communions. While the *Confession* did admit to the reality of the Universal Church, and therefore that there were real Christians in other groups, the Regulars kept their distance. The preface to the *Confession* did note that the Baptists were in agreement with the major Protestant bodies coming out of the Reformed tradition. Morgan Edwards went so far as to insist that the Baptists differed from the Independents only on the doctrine of believer's baptism, but that, he admitted, "keeps us a separate and distinct body of people." This separation was maintained throughout the century. In 1734, the Association agreed not to encourage the acceptance of a minister of a different persuasion at appointed meetings. It was better to pray, read Scripture and sing hymns without the benefit of a minister.<sup>8</sup> Their insistence on separation led most Regular Baptist churches to adopt the practice of closed communion: that is, only those who were members in good standing of Baptist churches could participate in the Lord's Supper.<sup>9</sup> That bar was the only sure way of protecting the Lord's table from

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>9</sup> McBeth, 249-250; Pascal, 511-512.

defilement. As we will see in the next section, the Baptist's view of the visible and invisible church remained throughout the century and became a major dispute in the early 1800s, when other denominations sought communion with Baptists. Later, this would become a major source of tension within the denomination, as more ecumenically minded Baptists joined with other communions in the new interdenominational organizations.

Morgan Edwards more than any other individual expressed the primitivist impulse among Regular Baptists in the eighteenth century. Born in Monmouthshire, Wales in 1722, he attended the Baptist Seminary at Bristol.<sup>10</sup> Commencing preaching at sixteen, he served congregations in England and Ireland until 1761. In that year, at the recommendation of John Gill, he sailed for the colonies to take charge First Baptist Church of Philadelphia. After a short time in that church, he resigned after allegations of intoxication and moved to Delaware, where he spend the next twenty five years preaching in various churches and compiling materials toward a history of the Baptists in America. He also spent his labors outlining the nature of the primitive church.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Welsh connection is particularly interesting. Many of the Baptist churches in the Philadelphia Association had many Welsh Baptist members. There is evidence that Welsh Baptists had a very strong primitivist streak, stronger than among English Baptists. On Baptists in Wales, see McBeth, 316-319.

<sup>11</sup> William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. 6 (New York: 1877), 82-83.

In his book, *The Customs of Primitive Churches* (1768), Edwards describes in the New Testament a detailed blueprint for church order and practice. Each aspect of church life, Edwards said, was regulated by laws. These laws were not the creation of men but were “enacted by the head of the church,” and were found in “the Bible and the Bible only.”<sup>12</sup> Christ had sole responsibility for the rules governing the church. “No man or set of men on earth,” wrote Edwards, “have a right to make one single law for Christians” without usurping the rule of Christ over his church and “making themselves kings in the Kingdom of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> In keeping with this perspective, each point is carefully referenced to its Scriptural precedent. Again and again in the text appears the phrase, “That there was such in the Primitive Church...” The care and precision with which Edwards discussed each feature of a “gospel church” reflects the primitivist’s concern with fidelity to the paradigmatic model. Everything which marked a gospel church occurs in Scripture, he said, and it is their very occurrence in Scripture which makes them the features of a gospel church.

In discussing these features, Edwards provided his readers with two definitions of the church, as he was very careful to distinguish between two uses of the term church. In one sense, the term church “properly means all the elect or that mystical body whereof Christ is the head and Savior.” Because all the members of the body consist of those in heaven, those on earth and not yet called, and those who were

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<sup>12</sup> Morgan Edwards, *The Customs of the Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia, 1768), 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

called but divided into distinct and separate societies, the scriptures add the qualifiers “Catholic, triumphant, militant, invisible” to distinguish between the spiritual church and the temporal or visible church.<sup>14</sup> It is this latter form that Edwards described in his treatise. Following the pattern of the Philadelphia Association, Edwards stated that the “particular church is a company of saints assembled together in one place, build by a special covenant into one body.”<sup>15</sup> The forms, offices and institutions of the church are all specified in Scripture. Indeed, Edwards stated that a church, even though a visible body of believers who have covenanted together is not a properly constituted gospel church until it appoints the officers and practices the ordinances specified in Scripture.

Edwards carefully outlined the duties and qualifications of the Scripturally authorized church officers. He discussed five in particular: teacher, elder, deacon, deaconess, and clerk. Each derived his authority from the local church that appoints and ordains him to a particular office. The officer, Edwards carefully pointed out, does not exercise any power of office apart from his appointment in the church. “When set in particular churches they acquire the relevant title....and lose them again when disengaged from the churches.”<sup>16</sup> Ministers in particular were limited in their authority. “The election...of a person to the ministry is an *act of the church*....Every

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12.

minister is church by *an act of his own church*. No man or set of men can do that for a church [emphasis added].”<sup>17</sup> This is a particularly important point, for it addresses one of the early fears of associations and reflects a key position in the Primitive Baptists later opposition to mission societies and theological schools. These institutions, the Primitive Baptists would later say, usurped the Scriptural authority of the church alone to call and ordain ministers. Only the local church, the Primitive Baptists would say as Edwards said, gave the minister his temporal authority to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances. The missionary organizations, the Primitive Baptists later argued, exercised church power without having the explicit model in Scripture.

Interestingly enough Edwards found scriptural precedent for the office of missionary or evangelist. Unlike the later position, this office was “occasional and temporary; thereof these titles...are but relatives, which they lose when the relation that giveth them rise, ceaseth.” Chosen out of those who have already been ordained to the ministry, they performed special errands of the church. As with all other officers, the missionary stood in relation to a local church. “They are put into office by the choice of those churches....And are to be paid by the same churches.” Sometimes one church would commission one of its ordained teachers to the office, but more often than not it would be the association of local churches who commissioned one of their own to address a particular problem of interest to the combined churches.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

What the public concerns of combined churches are appear daily. Some are vacant and want supply; some so poor that they can get no minister; some have divisions . . . some churches want help in choice, ordinations, or settling of officers; often churches are to be constituted; some dark corners may want the ministry, &c. How expedient then the office of *apostle of churches*.<sup>18</sup>

The missionary received no special ordination from the association that commissioned him. Indeed, there was Scriptural precedent both for the local church making the primary commission and for the temporary nature of the office in the example of Paul and Barnabas “for . . . it is said, they returned having fulfilled the work” they had been commissioned by the church at Antioch to do.<sup>19</sup>

Scripture, said Edwards along with other Baptists, carefully regulated the membership as well as the correct ordinances of the church. Members were to be tested for their religious experience, a statement of such given to the church body. If they were found to have given a credible account of their conversion, they were baptized by immersion and then received the laying on of hands, both according to Scriptural usage. Precedent testified to the importance of carefully testing potential members, because “the church is to exist in purity.” To let anyone in regardless of experience would be to commit the same mistakes that other churches made which “have lost their purity, have destroyed the distinction between the church and the world, and are become heterogeneous bodies.”<sup>20</sup> Admission into and ritual practices

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66.

within the church were supposed to be regulated by Scripture. Only those rites and ordinances which had apostolic origins were proper for a gospel church to perform. In surveying these, Edwards discussed nine: "Baptism, Lord's Supper; imposition of hands; right hand of fellowship; love feasts; washing feet; kiss of charity; anointing the sick; collecting for the saints."<sup>21</sup> Where specific instructions were given, such as directions that the Lord's Supper be observed "every Lord's day evening" or the specification that Baptism was to be by immersion only, those directions were to be followed to the letter by the churches. In so doing, the churches restored the order of the apostolic church.

While Edwards hoped that this work would be officially adopted by the Philadelphia Association, it was not. Apparently, not everyone shared Edward's primitivist rigor.<sup>22</sup> The primitivist strain evident in his work persisted, however, in the Regular Baptist tradition and later provided a basis for the union of Separates and Regulars.

In moving from a consideration of the Regular Baptists to the Separates, a student of the Primitive Baptists must take a major historical assumption into account. As stated by Richard Hughes, "The ecclesiastical pattern set by the Philadelphia Association exercised wide influence in the eighteenth century, but it was not the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, 83-84.

primary stream that fed...primitivism."<sup>23</sup> Historians of the Primitive Baptists have long contended that the direct ancestors of the antission movement are to be found among the Separate Baptists who emerged in the New England awakenings and spread south after 1755.<sup>24</sup> And they were indeed major contributors to the ideology of the movement. But they were not alone, for the Primitive Baptists absorbed tendencies from the Regular Baptists as well.

While the Regular Baptists sought to preserve right doctrine through creeds and strong institutions, the Separate Baptists had little regard for either. Born in the midst of revival, the Separates placed a specific form of religious experience at the center of their beliefs and practices. This emphasis left little room for doctrinal niceties, human conventions, or clerical rule. "The result was patent disregard for denominational conformity and a passion for conforming their Christianity to the original practice of Jesus and the apostles."<sup>25</sup> Separates were confirmed biblicists who viewed with suspicion the creeds that Regulars upheld as the guarantors of right faith and order. They needed no such intermediaries to preserve their faith; all they claimed to need was the Holy Spirit illuminating the Scriptures for them. Yet there was not so great a distance between the Regulars and Separates over the final authority of the Bible in faith and practice. David Thomas, a Virginia Separate Baptists, defended the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 90-92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 85.



biblical basis for their faith and practice in terms that would have pleased Morgan Edwards.

We therefore embrace these sacred writings as our only certain and infallible rule both of faith and obedience. All our religious notions, we desire to draw out of these pure and uncorrupted fountains of truth; and endeavor to think, and act agreeably to their direction.<sup>26</sup>

Yet this did not lead to a rationalistic, legalistic biblicalism among the Separates as it later did among the Stone-Campbellites. Hughes points out that the Separates sought “freedom in the Spirit.” While they looked to the Bible as the only rule for proper church order and was to be followed carefully, precise details of biblical form did not concern them “lest rigid patterns lead back to the conformity they had sought so ardently to escape.”<sup>27</sup> Certainly compared to the Regular Baptists, they wrote much less about the organization of their churches and the rules which governed them. Yet when they did, as seen in Thomas’ comments, the Separates reflected the same primitivist beliefs as their Regular counterparts.

The concern for the pure forms of the visible church stayed near the forefront of the Separate Baptists’ concerns. Primitivist impulses among Separates intensified as the group moved South and came under severe persecution by the colonial governments and the Anglican Church.<sup>28</sup> As the Separates spread throughout the

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<sup>26</sup> David Thomas, *The Virginian Baptist* (Baltimore, 1774), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Hughes, 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87. On the Separate Baptists in the South see McBeth, 227-235; Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago: 1977), 23-28; Paschal, 240-331.

South, the primitivist outlook intensified as a defense against such legal and popular attacks. In attempting to prove that they had the marks of the apostolic churches, the Separates developed a heightened concern to carefully duplicate all the forms and practices of the New Testament church. They agreed with their Regular brethren about the separation of the church into the visible and invisible. The latter, as David Thomas wrote, was “divided into many distinct societies, each of which is called a particular church.” These churches differed among themselves in form, rite and ceremonies, “and for that reason, pass under diverse, and distinguishing denominations.” The gospel church, however, was the Baptist church.<sup>29</sup> Only those individuals who could make a credible profession of faith were admitted and received baptism and the imposition of hands. While the Regulars stated this in their writings, the Separates took the preservation of the purity of the local church as an absolutely vital issue. “If one scabby sheep may infect a whole flock,” Thomas wrote, “what sort of a church would it be that embraces common drunkards, or swearers, or liars, or adulterers, or gamesters.” Aside from the possibility that unregenerate sinners might bring worldly influence into the church, Taylor also expressed the fear that bearers of such heterodox doctrine as “atheists, or deists, arminans, arians, and the like” would find their way through the church doors.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 25.

In the attempt to follow the New Testament pattern, southern Separates practiced the rites and appointed the officers Morgan Edwards had described in his work on the primitive church. Separatist churches typically observed the “nine rites” of the primitive church: baptism, Lord’s Supper, love feast, laying on of hands, foot washing, anointing the sick, the right hand of fellowship, the kiss of charity, and dedicating children. One way in which Separate primitivism led to a sharp difference with other Baptists was over the nature of the ministry. While the Regular Baptists were early advocates of an educated ministry, the Separates disputed the contention that formal education was necessary for a gospel minister.<sup>31</sup> In answering an opponent of the Separate Baptists, Thomas posed this opposition in these words:

That we deny the use of human learning, is a mistake, though we don’t approve of it as a mistress, yet we esteem it a serviceable handmaid . . . . What we say of human learning is just this, Although is it a desirable attainment in itself, yet it is when alone even in persons of the strongest capacities, utterly insufficient to show the way to salvation. Therefore it is exceeding dangerous to trust in it, or depend on it.<sup>32</sup>

As had the Regulars, Separates appealed to the apostles and the “primitive Christians” and scriptural “precedent” to support their church order. It is evident that most of their writings grew out of a need to defend themselves against such charges as novelty, that the Separate Baptists were preaching new doctrines and engaging in new practices. Their separation from the world, their rejection of social conventions and the trappings of Southern colonial society made them vulnerable to charges of spiritual

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<sup>31</sup> On the Regular’s advocacy of ministerial education, see McBeth, 235-239.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, 56.

snobbery and even undermining the social order.<sup>33</sup> Against all these charges, the Separates fell back on Scriptural precedent. Their teachings were not novelty—they were found in the Gospels, in the accounts of the Apostles, and in the letters of Paul. David Thomas went so far in his defense of the Baptist church in Virginia as to claim that the Baptist church will be found “exactly corresponding with the rule and line of the Gospel in every part of it.”<sup>34</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe the Separate’s reliance on Scriptural precedent as merely a convenient tool to defend themselves against different charges. The Separates were engaged in the same program of recovery as the Regulars. While historians have made much of the difference between the Regulars and the Separates, both desired the preservation of their understanding of the pure apostolic order within their own churches and carefully examined the Scriptures to ensure that their actual practices were in accordance with the paradigms they found there. Differences did exist between the two groups over cultural issues. Regulars did object to the what they saw as the emotionalism evident in the Separates’ worship and preaching; the allowing of women and untrained men to preach; the Separates’ objections to creeds; and their strict social customs. Separates, on the other hand, were reluctant to adopt the Philadelphia or any other confession of faith; they criticized the Regulars’

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<sup>33</sup> On this point see the works of Rhys Issac, esp. “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765-1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (July 1974): 351-62.

<sup>34</sup> Hughes., 87-88.

preference for an educated ministry and their toleration of expensive and stylish clothing among their clergy and members.<sup>35</sup> Morgan Edwards, along with others, emphasized what they had in common—namely a scrupulousness about following the primitive forms.<sup>36</sup> In the last thirty years of the eighteenth century both groups came together in association after association, in state after state, until only a handful of Separate or Regular associations remained. In the process of uniting, both groups underwent changes: the Regulars gave up their carefully written creeds and confessions of faith, the Separates gave up their fear of associations. But because both groups had a primitivist tradition, unification was possible.<sup>37</sup>

Primitivism continued to be an important element in Baptist theology in the period from 1790 to 1820. A prime example of its continuing relevance in Baptist thought was the debate carried on with other denominations over the issue of closed communion. Baptists came under increasing criticism in this period for their refusal to

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<sup>35</sup> McBeth, 233.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Even with this, unification of the Separates and Regulars was often a long and drawn out process. In his history of North Carolina Baptists, Paschal discusses in great detail the process of unification in the Kehukee Baptist Association. In that association, unification began with a drive among Regular Baptist churches to adopt the more stringent membership requirements of the Separates and enforce holy living among their members. Eventually, a large number of Regular Baptist churches who opposed the reformers split off and formed their own Association. The remaining, reformed churches united with the Separates in the area under the banner of the Union Baptist Association. It was not until 1790 that the remaining churches of the old Kehukee Association joined the reformed churches in reconstituting the Kehukee Baptist Association as one uniting Regulars and Separates. See Paschal, 414-445; 474-547.

allow individual Christians who had not been baptized by immersion to participate with them at the Lord's Supper. They staunchly defended their position because, as one author stated, "we view the ordinance to be a gospel institution and we have no rule to judge the qualifications of subjects for that solemn ordinance, only the practice of Christ and the apostles—and we dare not treat the special commands of Christ as non-essentials."<sup>38</sup> In formulating their arguments, the defenders of closed communion made the appeal to Scripture alone that Edwards and Thomas had used in describing the marks of a true gospel church. Daniel Merrill, in responding to a pedobaptist critic and proponent of open communion, stated "You ought not to fix your judgments....upon the arguments or confessions of great and good men, any further than such arguments and confessions are conformed with the Scriptures of truth."<sup>39</sup> The arguments in favor of close communion contained two elements including the Baptist's particular understanding of baptism and a sharp distinction between the visible and invisible church. Weaving these two elements together Baptist authors between 1790 and 1820 sought to construct an impenetrable bar to members of other denominations sharing the Lord's Supper in their churches.

Baptists accepted one form of baptism as scriptural, that of immersion of adults. From their earliest days Baptists had defended "believers baptism" against the claims of pedobaptists (the advocates of infant baptism) which in their minds had no

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, *A Defense of the Distinguishing Sentiments of the Baptists in their Views of Communion* (Brattleborough, 1817), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Merrill, *The Mode and Subject of Baptism* (Norwich, 1805), 7-8.

basis in Scripture. "It appears to us exceedingly plain," wrote Elisha Andrews, "that infant baptism is not so much as mentioned in the whole Bible."<sup>40</sup> In order for a church's baptism to be valid, Baptists argued, it had to be "administered according to the order of the Gospel." The gospel order of baptism had been established in Scripture, they believed, by Christ himself. To accept open communion from their perspective would mean rejecting the specifics of the mode of baptism or saying that it did not matter how the ordinance was administered. That was an impossibility, "for, from the command of Christ to his disciples to go and teach all nations, baptizing them—and from the practice of the Apostles, who did not delay baptism . . . it is evident that baptism was the first gospel ordinance the apostles administered" to new converts prior to their partaking of the Lord's Supper.<sup>41</sup>

Scripture left no room for argument over the issue, Baptists wrote, because they attested to the truth that Christ had prescribed the mode and subject of baptism so that man could know the divine pattern. The divine order of the gospel, then, was communicated by Christ, "who hath doubtless communicated his mind so explicitly that the humble in heart may know the common matters which relate to faith and practice."<sup>42</sup> For this reason, "No man, nor body of men, hath any more authority to

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<sup>40</sup> Elisha Andrews, *A Vindication of the Distinguishing Sentiments of the Baptists* (Boston, 1805), vii.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>42</sup> Merrill, *Mode*, 18; 53.

add to or diminish from this ordinance.”<sup>43</sup> The very forms of baptism and Lord’s Supper, not just the institutions themselves, were “ancient and perpetual inscriptions, which are on the pillar and ground of truth.” Because of their status as sacred writ, the scriptural standards of the ordinances could neither be added to nor subtracted from.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, following what they saw as apostolic precedent, Baptists rejected the admission of those they saw as unbaptized believers to the Lord’s Supper.

At the center of the debate was their understanding of the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. For the Baptist defenders of closed communion, the Lord’s Supper was a church ordinance meant only for members of the visible church. They carried forward the distinction Edwards, Thomas and others made between the two entities. If anything, many Baptist writers made the distinction even more dissimilar. There developed the idea that the multitude of non-Baptist denominations were not properly constituted churches because their members had not received “gospel baptism”—immersion. The anonymous author of *A Defense of the Distinguishing Sentiments of the Baptists*, granted that all who were called by Christ and elevated to salvation of the sovereign decrees of God, “whether they are regular members of a gospel [i.e. Baptist] church or not,” became subjects of Christ’s spiritual kingdom. There is a difference between the spiritual and visible kingdoms, “though the same moral qualifications that are necessary for one are for the other.”

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>44</sup> Merrill, *Open Communion with All Who Keep the Ordinances as Christ Delivered them to the Saints: Eight Letters on Open Communion* (Boston, 1805), 53.



The spiritual kingdom encompassed all believers in Christ “whether in heaven or in earth.” The visible kingdom, on the other hand, “contains only those who are introduced into it, *according to the order of the gospel*.” They did not deny that Christians existed within other churches, and were therefore worthy of having Christian fellowship extended to them. But the fellowship of individual Christians was of a different type and quality from church fellowship. “We cannot extend church fellowship to any but those who are regular members of a regular church in gospel order,” that is, in other Baptist churches.<sup>45</sup> Merrill writes, “piety of heart is the separating and perfect line of division between the invisible church of Christ and the men of the world. But it is *action*, it is *obedience visible*, it is keeping the *ordinance* of Christ as *he hath delivered them*, which marks the distinction between the *visible church* and all the world besides.”<sup>46</sup> Baptists insisted that they had no quarrel with attempts to fellowship with other Christians in prayer, worship and preaching. In fact, they saw it as a duty to cultivate such connections.<sup>47</sup> It was because of the pedobaptist’s refusal to administer “that ordinance of Jesus Christ, by which alone you can begin to be regular gospel churches, or church members,” they could have no fellowship with them in the Lord’s Supper. Closed communion did not exclude any church member and was not a violation of scriptural precedent. “It is not contrary

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<sup>45</sup> Anon., 5.

<sup>46</sup> Merrill, *Open Communion*, 56.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 33-34; Anon., 15.

from the Scriptures, if baptized believers are nowhere commanded to communicate at the Lord's table with such as refused to be baptized."<sup>48</sup>

The question of open communion involved a wider spectrum of concerns. In spite of declarations to the contrary, a fear of contamination by contact with other denominations exists in their writings. The call to open communion was seen as an invitation to "clasp . . . all upon the principle of sincerity." They painted pictures of churches invaded by a cacophony of competing doctrines. "We shall see the Calvinist, the Arminian, the Antinomian, the Moralist, the Arian, the Socian, the Universalist, the Restorationer, the Mahomadan, the Pagan, the Catholic, the baptized and the unbaptized." Open communion, they feared, would open the door to doctrines and practices which had no clear precedent in Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

The concerns over doctrinal purity and the defense of Scriptural models show the continued relevance of primitivism for American Baptists in the early 1800s. Their defense of their doctrines of baptism and Lord's Supper were based on the assumption that they were not of human origins. Because of their being ordained by God through the example and command of Christ, Baptists held that they had to be performed in accordance with the plain sense of Scripture. In the hands of men, they believed, Baptism and Lord's Supper could only retain their sacred quality if they were performed in exact accordance with the original model. Otherwise they would become

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 34; 36.

<sup>49</sup> Anon., 9-11.

human invention. This is exactly what happened, in their view, when pedobaptists baptized infants or sprinkled adult believers and then requested admittance to the Lord's Table in Baptist churches. The Baptism of the pedobaptists was not baptism because it was not sacred; they desacrilized the ordinance because they performed it in a way contrary to the divine model. Having no baptism, then, Baptists said the pedobaptist denominations had no basis for participating in an ordinance of the visible church. Only by performing sacred acts in exact conformity with the divine model the visible church be considered a properly constituted Gospel church.

While primitivist themes continued in Baptist writings and sermons in the early 1800s, new and competing ideas arose concerning the nature of the church's mission in the world which constituted a major challenge to traditional ways of thinking and organizing among American Baptists. In the end, the adoption of these new ideas by the vast majority of Baptist leadership would provoke a strong reaction from those who sought to defend Baptist primitivism.

## CHAPTER 4

### “THE EMPIRE OF JESUS IS RISING”: THE MISSIONARY SPIRIT OF AMERICAN BAPTISTS

In May of 1814 Baptist ministers from all across the young republic gathered in Philadelphia for the “General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States.” In a sermon given before the meeting Richard Furman of South Carolina identified the goals and aims that had brought them all to Philadelphia. “At the will of divine providence,” Furman said, “we are here assembled, to consult on measures the most eligible, for sending the blessed Gospel to the Heathen, and to nations destitute of pure Gospel Light.” Furman believed, along with the other delegates assembled before him, that they were at the threshold of the long-awaited millennial kingdom. “The Nations are convulsed,” he thundered, “and great events with respect to the Kingdom of Christ appear to be drawing near.”<sup>1</sup> This new order, the Kingdom of God on earth, would come about through their missionary activities.

The Philadelphia meeting was not the product of a sudden awakening to the possibilities of missionary activities. Rather, the meeting of the General Missionary

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<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention for Missionary Purposes, held . . . in May 1814* (Philadelphia: 1814), 23-24

Convention was the culmination of more than a decade's thought, writing, and organization. The delegates who formed the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions and many other denominational boards and societies in the following decades brought with them a missionary spirit with a forward looking millennial outlook that had been simmering in local and regional Baptist missionary societies since the late 1790s. Behind their ardent desire to Christianize the heathen and usher in the Kingdom of God were concerns arising from the nature of Christianity in the early republic. Missions and millennialism were two key aspects of their response to these concerns.

One of the earliest ministers to express the missionary spirit among American Baptists was William Staughton, pastor of First Baptist, Philadelphia. In this capacity Staughton was one of the most influential Baptist divines in the country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. His 1798 sermon, *Missionary Encouragements*, was one of the earliest ones printed on Baptist missions in the United States. "It is a pressing presage that a Missionary Spirit has gone forth in the world," he preached. With the spread of this missionary spirit, the darkened parts of the earth were coming into the gospel light. "Hindoos are ceasing to worship their Ganges, and idols are famished. The Ethiopian is chilled by the view of his crimes . . . From the uttermost parts of the earth we have heard songs, even, glory to the righteous."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Staughton, *Missionary Encouragements* (Philadelphia, 1798), 38.

Staughton was not the only Baptist who held these early sentiments. Another divine who would later become the leader of the national Baptist missionary movement was Richard Furman of Charleston. Through his activities in the Charleston Baptist Association, Furman became an early and active proponent of both home and foreign missions. In 1800 Furman brought a query from his Charleston church: "Is there not, at this time, a call in Providence for our churches to make the most serious exertions ... to send the gospel among the heathen?" The response to this query was lukewarm. In 1802, Furman brought with him another query. This one was more to the point:

Is it not in our power at this time to send out a missionary or missionaries, well qualified for the work, to preach the gospel to the many destitute people in various parts of our land; and do not zeal for the cause of God and love to the souls of men, require of us strenuous exertions in such an undertaking.<sup>3</sup>

In response, the Charleston Association instructed Furman to find and employ a minister for pastorless churches to be paid for by the association. At the same time, the meeting appointed Furman as the superintendent of the new mission to the Catawba tribe in the upper part of South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Thus was the mission seed planted in the South.

What is interesting in studying these early years of Baptist concern about missions is that the impulse toward organization was not confined to one region of the country. In light of later developments, the influence of the South should not be

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<sup>3</sup> James A. Rogers, *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 136-37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

surprising. Yet historians of missions in the United States have barely noticed it. The standard history of the missions in the United States by Ellsbree notes that New England Baptists formed their own missionary societies early on. Following British models, the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society held its first meeting in Boston on May 25, 1802.<sup>5</sup> This is seen as the first organization formed for missionary purposes among American Baptists.

But this is not the case. One year earlier, Georgia Baptists met in Powelton.

According to a report in the *Georgia Analytical Repository*:

The primary goal of these respected itinerant preaching, through, and to the utmost boundaries of the state, and the formation of a missionary society to support, if no more, a couple of pious, and suitably gifted ministers of the gospel, in confining their labors to our dark, and almost barbarous frontier, where, from a variety of obvious circumstances, there can be not standing ministry.<sup>6</sup>

This meeting called another one to be held at the same place. On April 29, 1802, they met once more, this time for the purpose of forming their missionary society—one month before the Boston meeting.

In a sermon preached before the Massachusetts BMS at their one year anniversary, Samuel Stillman recognized the pervasiveness of the missionary spirit in the young republic. “This same [missionary] spirit . . . united good men in our own country, who are exerting themselves in various ways to extend the redeemer’s

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver W. Ellsbree, *The Rise of the Missionary Spirit in America 1790-1815* (Williamsport, 1928), 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Georgia Analytical Repository* 1:2 (n.d.), 55.

kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> Three years later, William Collier preached that “the Gospel is to go forth from the church . . . in conformity to this sentiment, societies are formed, and missionaries sent forth, from the midst of our churches.”<sup>8</sup> The entire effort, Collier went on, was evidence that the hand of God was behind it. “What but the power of God could have inspired sowing evangelical ministries with one spirit and have engaged them to direct all their energies to the accomplishment of one grand object, the spread of the gospel?”<sup>9</sup>

The missionary spirit continued to spur Baptist organization building. These early societies concerned themselves primarily with home missions. Baptists sought to supply destitute sections of their states with ministers, plant churches in frontier areas, and attempt to convert the Native American populations within the United States. Early on, however, the leaders of the mission movement stressed the world-wide scope of missions. In their minds, home and foreign missions were linked. Stillman preached, “An extensive field for missionary laborers is before us in our own country! . . . We trust it is a prelude to that blessed day, when the earth shall be filled, with the

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Stillman, *A Discourse, Preached in Boston Before the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society* (Boston: 1803), 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> William Collier, *Sanctuary Waters, or The Spread of the Gospel* (Boston: 1806), 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



knowledge of the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> Interest in world missions was further fed by the extensive reprinting of correspondence from Carey in Burma.<sup>11</sup>

When Luther Rice arrived back in America, then, he came into a situation where the missionary spirit of American Baptists was present. His success at building a national organization came because of the foundational work done in the 1790s and 1800s.

Rice’s first contact with the Baptists came in a letter to Thomas Baldwin. Written from Bahia, Brazil, in June of 1813, Rice discussed his intention of visiting the country to solicit the aid of American Baptists for the maintenance of a mission in India. Rice asked for Baldwin’s assistance in this effort, especially one aspect of Rice’s design.

Impelled by the strong tied of my anxious feelings, I should proceed to use entreaties relative to the formation of a Baptist Missionary Society, or the adoption of some measures by the Baptist Churches in America, for the effectual and permanent patronage offered to and by so remarkable dispensation of divine providence.<sup>12</sup>

On his arrival in America, Rice began his lobbying for support of his call for a national organization. He established links between those in favor of his missionary plan, and founded several new missionary societies. The Massachusetts Society early expressed an interest. But Rice’s main problem was not in New England or in the

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<sup>10</sup> Stillman, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Elsbree, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 115.

Northeast, but in the South. In September of 1813, he embarked on a crucial tour of the area. The support of Baptists in the South was necessary for the success of his scheme.

Overwhelming support met Rice as he went from one Southern association to another. In October 1813, he assisted in the formation of a missionary society in Richmond. His travels took him to Savannah, where in December the Savannah Baptist Society for Foreign Missions issued a circular letter calling for support of Rice's scheme. The crucial Charleston Baptist Association, with Richard Furman in attendance, listened to Rice's appeal. Sitting in the audience, Furman must have felt great joy as he sensed that the fulfillment of his vision was near at hand. The Association directed him and two others to consider Rice's plan for cooperation. Furman's committee report backed the plan enthusiastically, and called for the formation of a national association of Baptists for foreign missions.<sup>13</sup> In February 1814, a bare four months before the national meeting, Baptists in Fredericksburg, Baltimore, and Washington formed missionary societies.

The ministers and lay leaders who formed and headed these new institutions did not admit that their aim was to reassert the authority of Protestant Christianity in American life. Rather, they framed their organizations in rhetoric about the coming of the Kingdom of God and similar millennial themes. Historians have long recognized the strong millennial element in American thought, especially in the Revolutionary and

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<sup>13</sup> Elsbree, 116.; Rogers, 140-43.

ante-bellum periods. The sense that the country was particularly graced by God, given a mission to spread the twin blessings of republican government and Christian civilization throughout the globe informed the thinking of many Americans and led to the development of a pervasive, if secularized, millennial vision of America as a beacon to the nations even in our century. For Christians who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the predominant interpretation of the millennium saw its inception by the Holy Spirit working through their actions. James Moorehead has written, historians have seen this postmillennial impulse as “an optimistic doctrine of gradual religious and secular improvement.” Mission-minded Baptists, as were their colleagues in the other denominations and the emerging benevolence societies, were friends of both religious and secular progress. Progress in all areas was the herald of the coming of God’s spirit in power. The revivals of the early 1800s were particularly auspicious signs. But nothing excited the millennial vision of Christians more than the spread of missionary societies. “Dilating on the glories of the millennial era,” he writes, “writers held out the carrot of success as an inducement to action. Triumph was certain, the labors of the saints would lead eventually to the millennial glory.”<sup>14</sup>

The adoption by much of the Baptist elite of this millennial rhetoric marked a departure from their past primitivism. Rather than seeking to restore and preserve a pure church based on New Testament models, the leadership of the Baptist denomination adopted the millennialistic institution-building perspective of

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<sup>14</sup> Moorehead, 527.

denominations such as the Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians. Their vision looked forward to the glory of the coming Kingdom, not backward to the “purity” of the early church. Thus, the conflict between Primitive Baptists and Missionary Baptists was fundamentally one of orientation in time. We cannot understand either group unless we understand their view of history and the role of human institutions in God’s plan for mankind. And understanding the missionary Baptist position means coming to grips with their millennialism. For it was the millennium that Baptist leaders optimistically thought their efforts and the efforts of their Protestant brethren in other similar societies would usher in.

The earliest missionary Baptist sermons express just this millennial optimism. Staughton in his 1798 sermon spent some six pages discussing prophesy and its relation to missions. The missionary, he said, “is looking for what is termed the latter-day glory, when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the place of the sea.” Is this a distant and future hope? No. Prophecies are being fulfilled in their own time, Staughton proclaimed. Both Daniel and Revelation speak of the condition of the church, with “perilous times and times of refreshing foretold.”

The prophetic books provided Staughton with all sorts of “harbingers of the day.” For example, he described the destruction of Jerusalem as “emblems” of the general “Destruction of vice.” “If similar events to those which preceded the ruin of the Jewish polity,” he wrote, “shall precede the overthrow of the anti-Christian governments of the earth, their end is assuredly not distant. The trees now shout

forth, and we seen and know, that summer is well nigh at hand.”<sup>15</sup> The events of the French Revolution and the war in Europe fulfilled further prophesy of “nation . . . rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” “Men’s hearts are failing them from fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.”

Staughton concluded by saying that “we feel little difficulty in saying, Little children, it is the LAST TIME; and as ye have heard that Anti-Christ shall come, even now there are many Anti-Christ, which we know it is the LAST TIME.”<sup>16</sup> While he repeats the warning of Christ, that “of the day and the hour of their arrival no man knoweth,” such is Staughton’s confidence that he says, “May we hope this blessed period is nigh at hand? We may.”<sup>17</sup>

The writings and sermons of the missionists are saturated with a sense of the rapid approach of the close of history. A carefully articulated outline of prophetic history can be found in a source as outside the mainstream of religious publishing as the *Georgia Analytical Repository* in 1803. The author of an article on the apocalypse wrote of the Book of Revelation as foretelling “the rapid progress of the Gospel in, and soon after the apostolic age, its triumphing over the errors and darkness of heathen idolatry in all parts of the world, and the subsequent decline of the church, the rise of two formidable apostasies, the Mohammedan and Papal, by which the church

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<sup>15</sup> Staughton, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 34–36.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

should be trodden under feet 1260 years, the rising of a dreadful blaspheming power, in the latter days, the reign of Christ on earth, and the final overthrow of all his enemies.”<sup>18</sup> The last trumpet of the book of Revelation, which heralds the triumph of Christ over the forces of Satan, “has been sounding ever since the commencement of the French Revolution.” In the conflict and strife among the nations of the world at that time, the author of this exposition sees “the seven vials, filled with the seven last plagues, have begun to pour out the wrath of God upon the sensual, atheistical, blaspheming and idolatring part of mankind.” “Is there not a strong possibility,” he concludes, “that we are living in the last days, under that third trumpet, which was to announce the pouring out of the seven vials of the wrath of God....and separate ‘the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff,’ and to prepare the righteous remnant of the church for the Kingdom of Christ?”<sup>19</sup>

Where do missions fit into this millennial scenario? Central to their expectations was the idea that in the last days there would come a gradual and steady growth of Christianity throughout the world. Ministers filled their sermons with imagery of the spread of the gospel through the world. William Collier in his sermon *Sanctuary Waters*, used the image of the Mountain and Temple as described in Ezekiel: “The river is a symbolical exhibition of increase of grace in the heart of every Christian and the progress of the gospel in the world....The spread of the gospel is in

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<sup>18</sup> *Georgia Analytical Repository*, 1:6 (March-April 1803): 264.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

*exact conformity to the infinite and eternal plan of the divine author.*"<sup>20</sup> Such a spread throughout the world conformed to the plan of God, but would not occur all at once. "The spread of the gospel is a gradual work. The Kingdom of Heaven, or gospel dispensation, like grace in the soul, may be compared to the growth of corn, which the earth bringeth forth of herself; 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear...'"<sup>21</sup> The entire history of the church spoke of such a gradual spread, in spite of attempts to suppress the gospel, but, Collier said, "as Christians, our hearts glow with an animation akin to the ardor of the angels, in prospect of the prosperity of Zion. We fully believe that reformation will succeed reformation, till every corner of the globe shall be illuminated with the rays of the Sun of Righteousness."<sup>22</sup> Collier pointed to several reasons for this confidence, chief among them "the glorious revivals of religion we have witnessed in our own happy land, and the view of the triumph of grace which have saluted our ears from foreign climes."<sup>23</sup>

Others spoke of the gradual spread of the gospel throughout the world.

Thomas Baldwin stated that the time was "not far distant" when "*the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the earth as the waters over the sea.*"<sup>24</sup> Knowledge of the gospel

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<sup>20</sup> Collier, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Baldwin, *The Knowledge of the Lord Filling the Earth* (Boston: 1812), 3.

would lead to the reformation of the hearts of men and lasting peace over the earth.<sup>25</sup>

“The time is approaching,” Baldwin went on to say, “when the saving knowledge of the Lord shall fill the whole earth; when there shall be a vast increase of spiritual light and love; when the blessings of the *new covenant* shall be extensively realized; and all shall know the Lord.”<sup>26</sup> Baldwin was clear how all this was to be accomplished. “The time is coming, and perhaps has already commenced” when the church would go throughout the entire world spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. “When the Lord gives the word, the company of them that publish it shall be great.” Clearly he has in mind missions, as represented by the “angel which John describes as flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, kindred, tongue and tribe.”<sup>27</sup>

Official Baptist publications also framed their advocacy of missions in millennial terms. The Baptist leaders who gathered in Philadelphia in 1814 expressed this millennial outlook in their official statements. “While we reflect on the great things God has already affected in the earth by means of the Gospel,” including “the laudable zeal which operates in the breasts of thousands for the enlargement of Christ’s kingdom, the Schemes adopted by men of an apostolic Spirit for the diffusion of Gospel-Light, and there going into successful operation under the smiles of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 15.



benighted Providence", they felt that "it is rational to look forward with pleasing anticipation to those blessed days which Prophecy has made known." Those days would see the triumph of Christianity spreading through the world and overthrowing the "Kingdoms of the world" and ushering in a time of "Benevolence, Harmony and Love."<sup>28</sup> The first annual report of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions in 1815 noted that they lived in "very eventful times," with the church "bursting forth as the light as the people that are sitting in darkness, and thousands are rejoicing at the brightness of her rising."<sup>29</sup> The authors of this report exhorted Baptists to the support of missions, stating that "the signs of the times call on the saints, as with a voice of thunder, to associate their counsels, contributions and labor, and to appear before the throne, offering the daily, united, and prevailing prayer, Lord let thy kingdom come!"<sup>30</sup> The voice of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, the appropriately-named *Latter Day Luminary*, said that "the rise of bible and mission societies are probably among the providences that....shall prepare the way for the coming of the Lord." This event, said the *Luminary*, would see "the earth that has for ages been a wilderness...converted into an Eden—righteousness shall prevail—peace shall flow like a river, and the church of God enjoy her long expected repose."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention . . . 1814*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> *First Annual Report of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions* (Philadelphia, 1815), 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Latter Day Luminary* (1818): 14.

This new Eden, the world transformed through the spread of the message of salvation throughout the nations, would not only be spiritual in nature. The missionary Baptists had absorbed and sacralized the eighteenth and nineteenth century's belief in progress. The link between a millennialism which called for the triumph of Christianity and a belief in the scientific progress of mankind for the better seems foreign to a time when both faith in both God and science are not widely held. Yet these men who believed that all truth was God's truth believed that the social, economic, and scientific improvement of mankind was part of His divine plan and guided by the same providence that directed their efforts at evangelism. They saw Christianity as having more than an impact on eternity; it was a real force for improvement of the world they lived in. William Staughton, in his first sermon on missions, said that "There are glad tidings of great joy," accompanying the spread of the Gospel, along with "a variety of senses in which Christianity may be viewed as tending to promote the happiness of a people."<sup>32</sup> Such benefits included restraints on vice, attacks on idolatry, the ending of war, and the virtues of republican civil government as well as agriculture and literature.<sup>33</sup> Later in the same sermon, Staughton points to the advances in science as harbingers of the latter days. He discusses the mass printing of books and spread of knowledge, improvements in natural philosophy, and changes in medicine.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Staughton, 21-22.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 36.

General Convention of 1814 noted as some of the harbingers of the latter-day “the advance of Sciences, Influence on civilized nations, and the means of intercourse with the rest of the world.”<sup>35</sup> In an 1803 sermon Samuel Stillman wrote of the “greatest advantages” of the Gospel to a society. “It produces the most evident and important change in the hearts and lives of those who really believe it . . . by its energy graces the heart, subdues the violence of he passions and regulates the conduct.”<sup>36</sup>

These men of the Enlightenment were convinced that solid, energetic institutions to promote benevolence could transform the world. Mission societies, they believed, were the divinely-ordained instrument of God to bring about his kingdom in their lifetime. Human instrumentality was a central feature of the missionist’s creed. “For effecting the conversion of sinners,” Richard Furman said in his address to the General Convention, God “usually acts through the medium of instruments. He has commissioned his ministers to ‘go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’ The suns of grace are introduced into ‘earthen vessels.’ Even the private Christian, as well as the pastor of the teacher, is permitted to enjoy the honor of being a fellow worker with God.”<sup>37</sup> “The diffusion of Bibles and the printing of the everlasting Gospel,” the editor of the *Latter Day Luminary* wrote in

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<sup>35</sup> *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention . . . 1814*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Stillman, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention . . . 1814*, 39.

1818, “are, without a doubt, the grand means which the Spirit of the Lord will employ for subduing the nations to the dominion of he Son of God.”<sup>38</sup>

The enthusiasm for missions expressed in the writings, sermons, and reports of the leadership of the Baptist denomination was reflected in the immediate actions of the local and state associations. The period from 1814 to 1820 saw a flowering of missionary organizing on these levels. There is almost no mention in this earliest period of any opposition to missions. Indeed, Luther Rice’s report to William Staughton in 1815 mentioned that practically all 115 Baptist associations associated with the Triennial convention had reported in favor of foreign missionary enterprises. This support extended to the South, where Rice had expected to encounter opposition. While some associations had not responded to the circulars and reports of the Triennial convention and the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, Rice attributed this more to indifference than an organized anti-mission sentiment.<sup>39</sup> Still, three years later in 1818 the *Latter Day Luminary* printed a report from the Washington Baptist Society for Foreign Missions which stated:

It appears that the missionary spirit has been widely diffused throughout our country, and is still spreading, from which circumstances we are more and more convinced that ‘the good hand of our God is with us,’ and that our labors of love shall not be in vain.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Latter Day Luminary*, (1818): iii-iv.

<sup>39</sup> Ellsbree, 118.

<sup>40</sup> *Latter Day Luminary* (May 1818): 99.

Early addresses from state societies reflected the post-1814 support for missions. One in particular came from the Southern, frontier state of Mississippi. In its circular Address in 1817, the Mississippi Society for Baptist Missions reported itself in favor of missions, “unbiased by any local prejudices or sectarian zeal.”<sup>41</sup> The need for missions was particularly acute both at home and abroad, as they expressed: “Behold the multitudes who are perishing for the lack of knowledge! See the humiliating condition of thousands of our countrymen!”<sup>42</sup> The members of this state society ascribed to the gospel the same civilizing qualities the national spokesmen did. “It is the gospel only,” they wrote, “which can retrieve the degraded character of man, and raise the female sex from the servile status of uncivilized nations To this we are indebted for useful learning, refined pleasures of reason and urbanity.”<sup>43</sup> The millennial vision of the national spokesmen found voice even among this state’s Baptists. “We live in an eventful period,” they stated enthusiastically. “It is the golden age of Bibles—the era of Missions—it is the army of the Kingdom of Christ! Hail mighty conqueror, the Prince of Peace and King of Righteousness.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Circular Address of the Mississippi Society for Baptist Missions, Foreign and Domestic, to the People of the Mississippi Territory and State of Louisiana* (Natchez: Andre Marchalk, 1817), 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

The 1819 circular address from the Oakmulgee Missionary Society (Georgia) was equally reflective of the millennial spirit accompanying missions when they wrote that “the empire of Jesus is rising, the day of the Lord is at hand, and the sins of the times indicate the day of the battle of the Lord of hosts is near.” The Oakmulgee association also expressed the theme of human instrumentality, stating the belief that missions were a divinely appointed instrument to bring this about. “How are these nations enveloped in heathenish darkness, to receive this gospel of the kingdom,” they wrote, “but through the instrumentality of those who have received this blessing, and to whom the Lord has given the means of communicating the same?” To the voices who questioned whether or not these were indeed the times prophesied in Scriptures, they pointed to the accounts in different denominational periodicals “of the wonderful things that the Lord has done through the instrumentality of their missionaries,” all of which testified to the idea that “all things are ready, but our willingness.”<sup>45</sup>

The circular letter of the Baptist State Convention of Alabama in 1824 expressed similar views.

This is the ‘era of good feelings,’ when men, formed for Society, are willing to associate for the purpose of doing good. It is the age of light, and zeal, and charity. It opens as the morning—is it not the dawning of the Millennium? The Sun of Righteousness is rising, at once in both hemispheres . . . and many, awakening from the long sleep of Pagan darkness, are running to and fro to disseminate knowledge—saving knowledge. Many, who had buried their Lord’s money, amidst earthly cares and the rubbish of a stinking world, are now cultivating their talents. Missionaries are sent to the uttermost parts of the earth

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<sup>45</sup> “Circular Address from the Oakmulgee Missionary Society,” *Latter Day Luminary* 2:11 (1819): 29-34.

with 'the glad tidings of the kingdom of God.' The isles are waiting for his law—Ethiopia stretching out her hands—nations rising to meet Him—kings bowing to his scepter, and queens are nursing mothers. Let every virgin in Christendom arise, and 'trim her lamp,' for the coming of the bridegroom, and 'wisdom shall be 'justified of all her children.'<sup>46</sup>

The general enthusiasm for missions, however, could not continue unabated.

The creation of a national denomination, with boards, an official newspaper, theological school, and means of gathering money represented an abandonment by the Baptist elite of Christian primitivism in the minds of a growing minority of the denomination. Before, this minority believed, careful attention had been paid to the forms and governance of the gospel church, with great care taken to model their institutions on the exact forms they believed they found in Scripture. Now, while they still looked to Scripture for their guide to doctrine and faith, Baptist leaders looked to other denominations and even "the world" for their examples, thus abandoning their historic Baptist traditions. Before, all power and authority was seen as arising from the local church, or no further than the local association. Now, however, came a centralized structure. While each church retained its autonomy, critics feared that these new institutions would eventually struggle with the local church for the allegiance of individual Baptists.

In addition, a modern institutional situation required new ways of thinking about the relationship between man and the divine. In seeming to abandon the paradigmatic myths of Scripture, the Missionary Baptists threatened the ways of

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<sup>46</sup> *Latter Day Luminary* 5:1 (January 1824): 20-21.

knowing God and comprehending the divine of thousands of their coreligionists. The man-made joined the sacred as equal routes to encounter God. Divisions between the spiritual and the material eroded, but did not collapse entirely. The missionary society, the theological school, the newspaper, the Sunday school, the bible society—God worked through these man-made institutions as well as those explicitly ordained in Scriptures to bring about his kingdom. The kingdom itself encompassed Christians in all denominations, and bringing it about required close cooperation in both non-church and church settings—including the Lord's Supper. The perspective of the Missionary Baptists threatened the Baptist primitivists ways of knowing and understanding God. A challenge to this threat was not long in coming.



## CHAPTER 5

### SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENT OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS AGAINST MISSIONS

The first association to separate formally from the Baptists denomination over missions was the Kehukee Association of North Carolina. Created in 1765, the founders had placed themselves squarely in the Regular Baptists tradition by adopting the London Confession of Faith as their fundamental creed.<sup>1</sup> The churches of the Kehukee association added hundreds of members as a result of the Great Revival of 1801.<sup>2</sup> One of the first mentions of missions occurred in its annual meeting in 1803, at the time causing little controversy, and nothing else related to missions or other similar organizations appeared in the minutes until the early 1810s. At that time, the association refused to approve the constitution of the “Meeting of Correspondence of North Carolina Baptists.” The church historian Cushing Biggs Hassell said that “the innovation was young . . . but it was assuming vast proportions, and the fear was that it

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<sup>1</sup> Cushing Biggs Hassell, *History of the Church of God, from the creation to A.D. 1885; including especially the history of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middleton, NY: G. Beebe’s Sons, 1886), 162.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of the revival from Lemuel Burkett and Jesse Read, *History of the Kehukee Baptist Association* (1803), 138-56. Excerpted in Catherine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797-1805* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 190-195.

would eventually . . . destroy [the churches'] liberties."<sup>3</sup> Four years later the Association made its acquaintance with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions when Elder Martin Ross—who a decade earlier had raised the issue of missions in the association—presented 31 copies of the board's first annual report.<sup>4</sup> In 1816 the association decided not to elect delegates to the Annual Meeting of Correspondence for North Carolina Baptists.

The entire issue of the new methods appears to have been dropped until 1827, when the association approved the *Kehukee Declaration to the Regular Baptist Churches of North Carolina*. Growing concern about missions, theological schools and Bible Societies came to a head in this one document, the publishing of which heralded the beginning of the Primitive Baptist sect. The language of the declaration stated the Kehukee Association's position bluntly.

After an interchange of sentiments among the members of the body, it was approved that we discard all Missionary Societies, Bible Societies, and Theological Seminaries, and the practices heretofore resorted to for their support, *in begging money from the public*. And if any person shall be among us, an agent of any of said societies we heretofore disassociate them in these practices; and if under a character of a minister of the gospel, we will not invite them into our pulpit; *believing these societies and institutions to be the inventions of men, not warranted from the word of God.* (Emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hassell, 726-727.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 729.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Berry, editor. *The Kehukee Declaration and Black Rock Address. With other Writings Relative to the Baptist Separation between 1825-1840* (Elon College, NC: Primitive Publications, n.d.), 14.

The Kehukee declaration began the process of schism repeated through the 1830s and 1840s as local churches and associations confronted the question of innovations in doctrine and practice. By the time of the Kehukee Declaration, the new methods of evangelism, the use of evangelistic organizations, and religious subjectivism and individualism had gained acceptance in Baptist circles. This acceptance was part of a larger process of change among American evangelicals, changes which changed the complexion of American evangelicalism. These developments, in the view of the Primitive Baptists, led to an abandonment of traditional interpretations of Scripture as constituting the sole models for evangelism.

The era of the creation of missionary societies saw the creation of a cultural consensus among American evangelicals that transcended denominational lines and embraced the vast majority of Christians by the late 1830s and early 1840s. This consensus, which the Primitive Baptists opposed in their polemics against missions and the other new institutions, replaced an older Calvinist orthodoxy an Armenianized theology which emphasized human instrumentality over divine power in salvation. This consensus found its ultimate doctrinal expression in Charles Finney's statement that revivals were "not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of constituted means—as much so as any other effect thus produced by the application of means." The new evangelical consensus was, at the same time, an intensely individualistic call to salvation which reduced the role of the church and creeds to the experience of conversion and a social ethic which saw the salvation of society as possible through concerted and organized action among

voluntary groups of Christians outside the traditional contexts of the church. Thus theologically and ecclesialogically the new evangelicalism posed a threat to traditional ways of religious practice as defended by the Primitive Baptists.<sup>6</sup>

The temper of the new evangelicalism during the years of the Second Great Awakening, can be gauged in the statements of a contemporary observer of the revivals, Rev. Calvin Colton. Colton was an English minister and strong advocate of the revivals of Finney and others. His *American Revivals of Religion*, published in 1832, was the first close analysis of the new revivalism. Of the revivals, he wrote of the times

Revivals of religion now—at least to some extent—are not simply regarded as things to be believed in, as possible with God, and then resigned to God, as though man had nothing to do with them; but they are laid out as fields of labor, in which it is expected man will be a co-worker with God. They are made a matter of human calculation by the arithmetic of faith in God's engagements.<sup>7</sup>

Colton expressed the developing opinion concerning revivals among American Christians. Whereas in the past revivals were seen as purely the work of god, Colton and others now said that they involved the active participation of individuals using means, cooperation with God in bringing them about. The use of terms as calculation and arithmetic express the scientific quality that were ascribed to revivals. Finney, whose faith in man and science sometimes appears to have surpassed his faith in God,

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<sup>6</sup> Conser, 230-231; 239

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Colton, *History and Character of American Revivals of Religion* (London: F Westley and A.H. Davis, 1852. Reprint New York: AMS Press, 1973), 6.

wrote that “revivals were as much a science as bridge building.” There were principles, laws concerning revivals and other religious activities which could be repeated and applied.

The contrast between the newer class and the older class of revivals was based on the use of human instrumentality..

In the first class [of revivals], God works in spite of and against the want of human instrumentality—he works against all the opposing tendencies of the prayerlessness, and the inactivity, and the very counter-workings of his people—and of his ministers even....He works as a sovereign, executing, not more than he has decried, but more than he has promised. In the second class, also, he works as a sovereign; because it is one part of his sovereignty . . . to meet his own engagements, to fulfill his promises—to work when his people work, and to work with them.<sup>8</sup>

Revivals were, in Colton’s words, “the grand absorbing theme and aim of the American religious world.”<sup>9</sup> In his historical view of revivals, God was still the author of revivals. But His people, the church, has progressed to the point of development in America that he can work through the various means and instruments developed by ministers for the purpose of gaining converts. Before, he worked independently of them because the church had not progressed to the point when God could use them. Earlier revivals, in Colton’s view, were training grounds out of which the later revivalists came.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Colton presented an argument in favor of the newness of the revivals which saw them as a natural stage in the development of the church. Because they did not resemble institutions or practices contained in Scripture, the new evangelicals had to argue that these were the modern means by which God accomplished his eternal plan, namely the salvation of the world. Due to the intellectual and cultural advances made by man in the centuries since the founding of the church, new forms and practices were necessary. Thus, whereas in the past God worked through the operation of his sovereign grace alone, in the more modern times of the Second Great Awakening he worked through human instrumentality. This argument resembled that made by advocates of missions, that missions were God's appointed instrument in modern times to accomplish the work of evangelism. This contradicted the entire view of primitivism defended by the Primitive Baptists.

Colton did not claim that God operated according to man's schedule or at his bidding. "The spirit of God is beyond our control," he wrote, but the use of man's "own voluntary powers" which God claimed the right to use are within their control. "I assume it then," Colton wrote, "that however God may be pleased, in his own gracious sovereignty, to originate revivals of religion, independent of visible human instrumentality, it is equally and invariably a part of his sovereignty to honor such instrumentality, in the accomplishment of the same result, when faithfully employed."<sup>11</sup> Human instrumentality "as experience abundantly proves, may be applied with

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 67.

success” in revivals if man exercised the correct faith. Such faith was “the very root, and living spring of that instrumentality.” As Colton described it, however, it was not so much faith in God as it was “a faith in the doctrine” of instrumentality in revivals.<sup>12</sup> Such “extra efforts and extra measures” were, Colton concluded, “indispensable to a revival, so far as they are to be brought about and promoted by human instrumentality.”<sup>13</sup>

The theological foundation of the revivalist’s view of human instrumentality in bringing about conversion was the doctrine of disinterested benevolence, originally formulated by Jonathan Edwards and reformulated by Samuel Hopkins. This doctrine expressed the new evangelicals’ view of God and man.

Edwards began with a primary emphasis on God’s sovereignty. To Edwards, this central attribute of the Almighty was the explanation for the existence of the world as well as being a motive for action. The thesis of his God’s Last End in the Creation of the World was that the glory of God, not the happiness of man, is the last end of creation. “A clear view of the acts of God reveals, not that all things are designed for human happiness, but, that human happiness is conditional upon the discovery that they are not so designed.” From this view Edwards conceived his view of true virtue as “benevolence to Being in general.” To Edwards the Christian demonstrated true virtue when they approached life disinterestedly. The truly virtuous person was only

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 106.

concerned with determining life's role in the glory of creation, to understand and appreciate them as elements in Universal being. "A disinterested approach to the facts of life," he wrote, "with a view to determine their true light in the glory of Creation, to understand and to appreciate them as elements in universal Being, is the foundation and substance of 'true virtue.'" Such disinterested benevolence is exhibited in an "intelligent love for things in particular."<sup>14</sup> At its foundation was a love focused on God; hence all this could be disinterested because they are not interested in the facts of life in and of themselves, but only insofar as they were a manifestation of the Glory of God.

To Edwards, God was the supreme object of the love of a truly virtuous person. The events of the world are partial communications of the infinite and eternal glory of God. A benevolent regard for the universe, therefore, implies a harmonization between the human will and the facts of existence. The truly virtuous person delights in these, not for their own sake or his own happiness, but because they are evidence of God's handiwork. Creation, in Edwards view, is a "reflection of the diffused beams of God." "Therefore," says Joseph Haroutunian, "the glory of God as communicated to and exhibited in His creation is an object more worthy of benevolent regard than any particular thing in heaven or on earth." "A benevolent propensity of the heart to Being in general," according to Edwards "and a temper or disposition to love God supremely, are in effect the same thing."

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Verses Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 72.



Virtue as expressed by Edwards, was “under the sovereign dominion of love to God, above all things.” It sought “the glory of God” as its “supreme, governing, and ultimate end.” While natural man could do virtuous acts or do acts of benevolence to fellow men, the Christian did them without any other regard to any kind of temporal benefit. While such acts by the Christian may have temporal benefits, the primary reason for doing them was because they exhibited the individual’s love to God. Creation—individual man in society—emanated from the mind of God (in Edwards’ ontology) and could thus only be appreciated with a mind under the sovereignty of God regenerated by His spirit. “So far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God’s glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity and love to him, and joy in him.” Anything less, in Edwards’ view, is not of the nature of true virtue.<sup>15</sup>

Edwards’ concept of true virtue amounted to an esthetic contemplation of God as God and God as expressed in his creation. But disinterested benevolence was formulated by Samuel Hopkins as an expansion of Edwards’ doctrine of true virtue. Rather than being occupied with an abstracted love for “Being in general,” Hopkins described disinterested benevolence as first and foremost obedience to God’s law. “The Law of God leads us to consider holiness,” Hopkins wrote, “as consisting in universal, disinterested good will, considered in all its genuine exercises and

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue*, vol. 2 of *The Works of President Edwards* (1817; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 24.

functioning and acting out in all its branches toward God and our neighbor.” Once Hopkins began to stress love for his neighbors as a definition of love for ‘being in general,’ he easily passed on to such statements as “true benevolence always seeks the good of the whole” and said that the law of God commanded men to act for the sake of the glory of God and the greatest Good of mankind.<sup>16</sup>

Hopkins moved away from Edwards’ definition of virtue as an abstract contemplation of “Being in General” or stimulation of the affections. “Love to Being in General,” he wrote, “is obedience to the Law of God, commanding us to love God and our fellow creatures; for these are being in general and comprehend the whole of being.” Such obedience expressed the Christian’s benevolence to being in General in a way that Edwards did not express. “He who does not exercise universal benevolence, does not obey the first nor the second commandment, but he who loves being as such, or singly considered, which is the same as being in general—I say, he who loves being in general, loves God and his fellow creatures and, therefore, obeys the two great commands.”

Hopkins equation of ‘being in general’ with ‘God and our fellow creatures’ had far reaching consequences. As Haroutunian points out, “the whole Calvinistic perspective has come to a vanishing point. Holy love, as a spontaneous conformity of the will to the decrees of God as revealed in the facts of life, is replaced by another

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<sup>16</sup>William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959), 102-103.

love, inspired by a good God seeking the happiness of men.”<sup>17</sup> Holiness, the product of a sanctified heart, came to be understood as a universal benevolence to all intelligent beings which was the holy love required by God’s law. It was a ‘friendly affection’, a kindly regard to the good others, good will extended from one man to another, a humane partiality for the happiness of others, as well as one’s own.<sup>18</sup> In Hopkins’ system of ethics, love for neighbor “is not really a distinct thing from seeking the glory and Kingdom of God, as they perfectly coincide.” Hopkins moved far beyond Edwards and towards a “triumphant humanitarianism.” The Kingdom of God became a social institution which would be brought about by the concerted action of believers united by their concern for the highest good of the whole, not first and foremost to glorify and lift up God. “The last end of God in creating the world was the establishment of this moral kingdom. Hence, the substance of religion is to serve God in and through the service of man, a disinterested affection toward God.”<sup>19</sup>

Hopkins’ reinterpretation of Edwards’ understanding of true virtue was the foundation for the new evangelicalism underlying revivalism and religious voluntary associations in the 1800s. He assisted in the diluting of the doctrines of total depravity and regeneration which would be a central part of Finney’s theology. God became

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<sup>17</sup> Haroutunian, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 86.

less than the all sovereign deity except for his mercy and goodness.<sup>20</sup> Holiness came to be equated in Calvinism with obedience to God's law. Thus, Calvinism had by the early 1800s become nothing more than legalism stripped of any sense of God's sovereignty. Leaders of the churches believed that the people had to be exhorted to conform to the Scripture's teachings on the conduct of life. They would use the churches and voluntary association designed and staffed by them to make people good, good defined as acting in accordance with the Law of god. As a consequence, virtue came to be defined as obedience. "Obedience to the Law," Haroutunian comments, "became a mere matter of obligation. The Law demanded conformity without impressing the sinner of its own excellence, for to do so would be to impress her with the enjoyable consequences of obedience."<sup>21</sup>

While Hopkins and his successors diluted Edwards' Calvinistic view of benevolence into a doctrine suitable for the type of socioreligious organization building evangelicals engaged in the 1810s and 1820s, Charles Finney completed the destruction of Edwards' legacy and provided evangelicals with a doctrine of human instrumentality perfectly suited to the new institutions. While Finney has been credited with beginning the new revivalism, he was in many ways a systematizer rather than an innovator. He borrowed a great deal (unacknowledged) from Hopkins, particularly in the area of the relationship between personal holiness and the Law of God. Finney

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 89-90; 93.

took Hopkins' teachings one step further and reduced justification to the intellectual assent of an individual to God's law. The systemization of Finney's doctrine had important consequences for missions and other evangelistic activities, not least of which providing the main argument in favor of the new methods—God worked through human-created means, and they worked.

Finney's rejection of orthodox Calvinism came at a time when that system of thought as a coherent set of doctrines had virtually disintegrated under the weight of post-Edwardsian revisionism and cultural changes in the new United States. The generation to which Finney belonged had a much greater faith in man's ability to solve life's problems without the governance of a absolutely sovereign God. They had listened to the rationalistic arguments of the deists and the more sanguine theologians of Universalism and Methodism and found much that 'made sense.' What Americans began to require after 1800 was a theology that could justify itself before the common sense of the average man combined with an emphasis on individual religious experience, one which reflected cultural opinions about the nature of man and his ability to reform himself and society.<sup>22</sup>

Finney reflected this in his sermons and doctrines. In McLoughlin's words, he "combined reason and emotion, faith in the bible and faith in human intelligence, belief in the benevolence of God and belief in the perfectibility of man." In addition Finney adroitly reconciled religion with the growing faith of Americans in science by justifying

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<sup>22</sup> McLoughlin, 21-22; 66-67.

his revival method in terms of human psychology, or, as he called it, “the laws of the mind.”<sup>23</sup> Finney brought to Scriptures the Enlightenment assumption that God must ultimately be reasonable. He believed that God worked according to those fixed laws of the mind, which like everyone else in 1831 Finney believed operated in accordance with mechanistic principles which were “analogous to the law of gravitation in the material universe.” He went so far as to say that the confusion in theology was the result of Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers’ ignorance of the science of the mind. Their “reformation was but partial” for this reason.<sup>24</sup>

Armed with these “laws of the mind,” Finney proceeded to redefine the doctrines of regeneration and justification. In essence, Finney rejected orthodox Calvinism’s formulation of regeneration as preceding justification, as being the change of heart brought about by God with his sovereign Grace in his own providence. Such a change of heart was a constitutional change—a change which was unnecessary because there was nothing wrong or corrupt about the human heart in the first place. Finney rejected the doctrine of total depravity. Instead of being unable ever to act rightly, he said, man “has the understanding to perceive and weigh; he has conscience to decide upon the nature of moral opposites; he has the power of liberty of choice.” Man’s heart was not depraved by Adam’s sin but only prejudiced by self-interest and ignorance. It did not need a supernatural shock, but a humanly engineered

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 68.

reorientation. "I understand a change of heart," Finney wrote, "to be just what we mean by a change of mind." Conversion became a decision of man he could be persuaded to using the methods of the revival preacher, the missionary or the tract distributor. While God was still involved, Finney limited his agency to workings through human instituted means.<sup>25</sup>

Against the advocates of the new measures the Primitive Baptists defended traditional understandings of the sovereignty of God and how he worked. The key element of the Primitive Baptist's objection to missions and to other new measures was their argument that the new organizations, institutions and practices, because of their emphasis on human instrumentality, violated the expressed dictates of Scripture. God had laid out precisely how he wanted his work done. The advocates of the new measures, the Primitive Baptists argued, were guilty of displacing God's ways with mans. In the process of diluting His sovereignty in salvation they usurped God's sovereignty in every other area. The authors of the Kehukee Declaration were motivated by a desire to preserve what they saw as the purity of the primitive order as they found it in their reading of Scripture. This order was under attack, they believed, because the missionary Baptists sought to replace what the antissionists believed was the God-ordained institution of the church with what they saw as man-made ones. In usurping the divine order of things, the missionary Baptists had precipitated

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 69-72.

the split, forcing the Primitive Baptists (they claimed) to separate from them in order to preserve the purity of the gospel tradition.

Why did the Primitive Baptists focused so much emphasis on missionary societies? Traditional explanations of opposition which were based on an understanding of Primitive Baptists as hypercalvinists are not supported by pronouncements from Primitive Baptists themselves that they did not oppose the spread of the gospel per se, only the new methods of evangelism. A much more likely explanation is that Primitive Baptists focused on missions because they embodied all they found wrong in the new evangelicalism. Missions were symbolic of all they found wrong with the revivalists' emphasis on means and their seeming removal of divine influence from the revivals. The Kehukee Declaration came a decade after the convention which formed the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, the beginnings of missionary efforts among American Baptists. The immediate spur, then, could not have been the formation of the mission societies. As we have seen, local mission societies had been organized all across the country. Little opposition to missions is recorded before the mid 1820s. One is compelled to the conclusion that missions were more a symbolic than an actual target. By focusing their fire on missions, the Primitive Baptists attacked the new methods as they began to infiltrate Baptist churches in the late 1820s.

The evidence to chart this is anecdotal at best. One source we have which illustrates the transition from traditional to new methods of revivalism and evangelism is the autobiography of Wilson Thompson, one of the most revealing autobiographies



we have of the life of a Baptist preacher who later joined in the Primitive Baptist schism. Thompson, who had been converted in the Great Revival and had experienced revivals in his congregations in the Missouri Territory in the early 1810s recorded the activities of Jeremiah Vardman, a Baptist revivalist. Thompson had heard him speak of Calvinism in dismissive terms to students at a seminary in Cincinnati. He was not surprised. He had witnessed Vardman's revival style the previous night.

Mr. Vardman then arose and said in a dull, low manner that he very much regretted the unprofitable manner in which the evening had been wasted. It was now too late to do anything to profit, and the people must wait until another opportunity. All at once he raised his voice and said: 'Late as it is, I feel such an agonizing of soul for those poor mourning sinners, who feel as if this might be the last hour that salvation would be offered to them, that I cannot dismiss them until I have given them one more opportunity to come forward for me to pray for them.'

'All the people seated on those long benches fronting the pulpit', said he, 'will please leave them for the mourners to occupy, while I come down to pray for them. All who desire salvation will come to these seats. I have prayed for such hundreds of times, and never without more or fewer being converted while I was praying; therefore, come without delay'.

We went down. He started a song and, as many voices joined in the singing, the spacious house was filled with melody. Every few minutes he would raise his voice and tell the mourners to 'come on', and 'not confer with flesh and blood;' 'this might be the night that would seal their eternal doom;' 'come and receive offered mercy.' Again, he would order runners to go up every aisle and lead the mourners to these benches. Yet, with all this, they came but slowly. He stepped upon one of the long seats, and turning his eyes upward and raising his hand with his arm stretched out above his head, he roared at the top of his voice, in an authoritative manner: 'Stop, Gabriel, stop; don't speed your golden pinions again, nor attempt to take the news to the throne of God, until you can report at least fifty humble mourners on these anxious benches seeking the salvation of their souls amid the prayers and songs of God's elect.'

When he had given his command, he raised his right foot and hand and stamped with his foot on the bench, at the same time striking

the back of it with his open hand, making a startling sound through the spacious house. This he repeated three times, in rapid succession, and then followed a general movement though the house. He stepped down from the seat, telling them to sing with more animation, and not to pause between the songs even for one minute. His runners now began to lead in the mourners very fast. They were handed up to him; he would slap them on the shoulders and halloo, 'Glory to God,' and motion them to the seats. The seats were soon filled, and no more came. He ordered the singers to stop singing, and commanded every person in the house to go upon his knees. He knelt, and in that position surveyed the congregation; and again, in an authoritative manner, cried: 'God down upon your knees, I say; young me, down upon your knees! "It is written, unto Me every knee shall bow"' When he had spent some time in this way, and had got all that would obey him on their knees, he pronounced some very heavy invectives on the others, and then said: 'Let us all pray.' He went on to give a history of his coming to Cincinnati; of the cold state he had found the city and the church in; how he had proceeded since he came in; how many he had baptized; and the great work that was going on with increasing power. This historical account made up his prayer.

He then called upon the singers to assist him, and he commenced singing the hump, 'How happy are they who their Saviour obey', etc. They all joined in the singing, and he passed between the benches where the mourners had been placed, and stooping down to each one he would, in a low whisper, converse a short time with them, and in many cases he would rise up erect, clap his hands together, and shout 'Glory to God, here is another soul born for heaven.' In this manner he passed between all the mourners' benches. I had not seen one among the whole number that I thought looked like a contrite mourner, such as the Saviour pronounced the blessed, at least as far as I could judge from the appearance of those even who were on the anxious benches.<sup>26</sup>

The Primitive Baptists' critique of the new measures paralleled the arguments of the confessionalist theologians who later attacked religious subjectivism and innovation in evangelism. One of the most significant blasts against the new methods

<sup>26</sup> Wilson Thompson, *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson, embracing a sketch of his life, travels and ministerial labors* (Greenfield, IN: D.H. Goble, 1867), 312-321.

came from John Williamson Nevin at the German Reformed Church's theological seminary at Mercersburg in his tract *The Anxious Bench*. Nevin's concerns reflected Thompson's about the type of revivals he recorded above. To Nevin, the anxious bench symbolized the problems with the new methods. He contended that "the Anxious Bench, and the system to which it belongs, has no claim to be considered either salutary or save in the service of religion. It is believed [by Nevin] that instead of promoting the cause of true vital godliness, they are adapted to hinder this progress."<sup>27</sup> The progress of true, God-sent revivals were in danger of being hindered by these use of these new measures. Nevin warned that, with the manipulation and naked appeals to emotionalism in the new measures revivals, spurious conversions, gross irregularities and extravagances "are actually at work in connection with such excitement on all sides." What resulted was the spread of false doctrines and views of the churches, thousands were given a false assurance concerning their salvation. Instead of opening the gates of heaven wide, the revivalists threw up "vast obstructions . . . in the way of true godliness" in the form of "spurious revivals and false conversions." The anxious bench, Nevin argued, "may be crowded where no divine influence whatever is felt. . . Hundreds may be carried through the process of anxious bench conversions, and yet their last state may be worse than the first."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "The Anxious Bench," in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, Edited by Charles Yrigogen and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978), 25

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27, 36-37.

The Primitive Baptists anticipated many of these arguments as they formulated their scriptural opposition to missions. But unlike the confessionalists, the Primitive Baptists added the argument that the new methods were wrong because they had been created by man using “human wisdom” instead of biblical precedent. The new evangelical’s language of human ability, progress, science and utility was foreign to Primitive Baptists used to a language of human depravity, divine sovereignty, and adherence to primitive Scriptural models. The new evangelicalism, symbolized for the Primitive Baptists by missionary societies, theological schools, and a host of other institutions, threatened these categories and forced the Primitive Baptists to defend the old order against the perceived assaults of the new methods.

Daniel Parker’s tract against missions was the first to enumerate the Primitive Baptists’ objection to missions based upon their reading of Scripture. He directed his primary criticisms against the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions for attempting to centralize and control the ministry in the United States.<sup>29</sup> The Board, Parker argued, was trying to place itself in the position of recruiting, training and appointing ministers—activities which God through the local church accomplished according to Scripture. Parker asked his fellow Baptists to “ask their Bibles and their hearts, if they don’t believe that God has ever called on the Christian world to look out, call, qualify, and send out preachers,” or has God “reserved that work for himself,” and fulfilled it

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Parker, *A Public Address to the Baptist Society, and friends of Religion in General, on the principle and practice of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions for the United States of America* (Vincennes, IN: Stout & Osbourn, 1820), 16-17.

in His own time and way.<sup>30</sup> Because of their presumption, Parker judges that the board “in their principles and practice, have rebelled against the Kingdom of Zion, violated the government of the gospel church and forfeited their right to the union and brought distress on the church of Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

Parker had no doubt that the heathen nations would hear the gospel because it was prophesied in Scripture. Scripture, however, said nothing about missions as the means of evangelizing the world. Parker did not dispute the continued relevance of the Great Commission to the church but called into question its utilization by missionary societies to justify their existence. “Was this a missionary society that gave this command,” he asked, “or is it the command of our King.” The command to evangelize came directly from Christ to his disciples and, through them, to the church. There existed then no society for the purpose or to prepare those disciples. “Was there a missionary society independent of the church to send them and fix on the field of their labors, and support them, or a seminary of learning laying between those disciples and the place the Lord was about to send them?”<sup>32</sup> He concluded that this command to his disciples “as representatives of the church” would accomplish “the work of salvation throughout the world, agreeable to his own council, and admits of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 27.

no alteration.<sup>33</sup> The sole source for the propagation of the gospel was to be the Church established by Christ as governed according to Scripture, not missionary societies established by men.

Aside from the Great Commission, the missionaries used Acts 12—the sending out of Paul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch—to justify the formation of missionary societies. Parker challenged their interpretation of this text based as it was on his understanding of the church as the sole institution ordained by Christ in the New Testament. To Parker, the entire story showed “the order of God in his Church, and the union that exists between Christ and his church; first His calling His preachers . . . and then the church, (not a missionary society) sending them out in gospel order to preach and administer the ordinances of the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> God in his word placed sole authority in the local church to spread the Gospel, and not extra-local bodies. “The principle and practice” of missions, Parker insisted, “is according to the spirit of this world, and not according to the spirit of the Gospel.”<sup>35</sup>

The advocates of missions often granted the point that, while missionary organizations were not explicitly sanctioned in scripture. But, they went on to argue, God worked through these new institutions because they had been formed by his people to accomplish the greater end of spreading the gospel. This utilitarian

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 35.

argument for missions reappeared in arguments in favor of new measures in revivals. Parker rejected this argument. “We all agree that the object is good,” Parker said of spreading the Gospel, “but for us to step in the places of God to send means to accomplish the birth of the heirs [of the Kingdom] must be horrid and wicked.”<sup>36</sup> The missionary society, then, derived its inspiration not from God, but from the world. Human reason may justify the organization of missionary societies, but the gospel does not.

Missionary societies, Parker argued, derived their inspiration from worldly models rather than models drawn from God’s Word. “When we try the principles and practice of the mission system for the spread of the gospel by the word of God, they are different, for the mission plan is to look to the world for qualification and support, while the scriptural plan is to look for God for both.”<sup>37</sup> The formation of mission societies, in Parker’s view, was at odds with the church as Christ established it, that they found in the New Testament. Nothing in Scripture, Parker said, had ever authorized man “to alter his law or change the method of government, that he gave his church, nor arresting the authority he has given into their hands.”<sup>38</sup> Because the mission societies and their supporters were altering Christ’s method of government and replacing it with worldly models, Parker declared that “they have most certainly

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

rebelled against the authority of Christ, for we Baptists prefer to believe . . . that the internal work of the calling and sending of preachers, is as evidently performed by the Spirit of god on the heart.” In addition, their rebellion manifested itself in investing themselves with the authority of a church, even though not constituted as one.<sup>39</sup>

The contention that the missionary Baptists were in rebellion against God appeared in the Black Rock Address. This document, named after the meeting which occurred in the Black Rock Association in Maryland, centered its arguments against missions upon the lack of scriptural support for the new institutions. The Address began with an invitation to the pro-mission forces, “to pause and reconsider how far they have departed *from the ancient principles of the Baptists*. (emphasis added)”<sup>40</sup> The Black Rockers, as they came to be called, understood themselves as preserving what they understood as the scriptural traditions of the Baptist churches which had gone before them. “It is well known,” the authors of the address wrote, “that it was in ages past a manifest and distinguishing trait in the churches of the Baptists, that they regarded a ‘Thus Saith the Lord,’ that is, a direct authority from the word of God for the order and practice, as well as the doctrine they received in religion.”<sup>41</sup> In their time, the Black Rock Address alleged, Baptists looked to extra-scriptural models and other denominations for their inspiration. It was in defense of the scriptural models

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>40</sup> Berry, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



they found that the Black Rockers, like other antimissionists across the country, separated from the missionary Baptists.

In justifying their separation, the Black Rockers enumerated specific scriptural objections to the institutions advocated by the missionaries. Missions and the other new institutions, the Address alleged, were objectionable because they attempted to replace divine revelation with human wisdom. Tract Societies the Address contended, “represent tracts as possessing in them a superiority over the Bible, and over the institution of the gospel ministry, which is charging the great I AM with a deficiency of wisdom.”<sup>42</sup> They objected to Sunday Schools as means of salvation and evangelism, arguing that they taught that a head knowledge of salvation was as effective as the Holy Spirit in changing a person’s heart and moving him towards God.<sup>43</sup> These organizations collapsed the barriers between the divine order and human invention as did the missionary societies. Like Parker, the Black Rockers acknowledged the importance of the Great Commission and its fulfillment through individual churches and called ministers of the gospel. Yet of the new organizations, they wrote “we have no right to depart from the order which the master has seen fit to lay down, relative to the ministrance of the Word.” For this reason the Black Rockers concluded that

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

“these plans throughout [constituted] a subversion of the order laid out in the New Testament.”<sup>44</sup>

The signatories to the Black Rock Address understood themselves as standing for the primitive New Testament church against all attempts to add man-made institutions and doctrines. “They [the missionary Baptists] declare the gospel to be a system of means . . . and they act accordingly.” The New Testament, however, contained no sanctions for any Christian organizations except for the local church and its officers. The attempt by the missionary Baptists to state otherwise was adding man’s wisdom to divine revelation. The problem arose when men, in the view of the Black Rockers, believed that the means God had instituted were no longer effective. The Black Rockers believed, however, that “we should go forward in the path of duty marked out, believing that God is able to accomplish his purpose by such instruments as he chooses.” According to Scripture the Lord “hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and base things, &c., hath God chosen, that no flesh should glory in his presence.” While the Primitive Baptists, using traditional means, might not see the remarkable numbers of people being converted using the new methods, the Black Rockers stated that such success was not important to them. They were more concerned with conforming to the God-ordained models of church practice and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30.

organization as contained in Scripture “knowing that it pleased God, not by the wisdom of men, but by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.”<sup>45</sup>

The statements of the Kehukee Association, Parker, and the Black Rock Association appealed to many Baptists because they fit with their understanding of the position taken by the advocates of missions. Primitive Baptists filled the pages of their denominational journals with reports of the effects of the new organizations in local churches and societies. In the minds of the antissionists, the missionary preachers who were spreading the new methods contradicted traditional ways of practice in churches and led to conflict. One Kemuel Gilbert from Franklin County, Virginia, gave a detailed account from his church. He had become a Baptist thirteen years previously, at which time the churches “seemed to be in peace.” At some point, however, “the churches below the Staunton River and their branches and others began to interrupt us with the new schemes, which have since and before caused so much confusion and distress in almost all the Baptist churches in my acquaintance, more or less.” At that point they sought to divide the association “thinking we should get rid of them.” This was accomplished, with the new association maintaining correspondence with the old for several years afterward and with others who supported missions. Such communication, Gilbert asserted, continued to upset the churches as individual preachers and churches were brought into the missionary fold. Eventually the struggles in the churches got to the point that a large majority voted to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

separate from the missionary churches and to not correspond with the other association. Subsequently the new school side "began to be the most active men in hurrying on the division, for fear some of their side would be lost, and commenced raking together all they could in order to constitute them churches in this district."<sup>46</sup>

Other correspondents reported similar upsets. From Wilmington, North Carolina, the author of which recalled that "the missionary sword came, and great had been the sound of the trumpet. For it has turned every way to cut in two this once beloved little band of brethren." The missionaries had come into their churches in the late 1820s "friends, as we then thought, but spies, I now believe, who persuaded us to send for their ministers." After initial hesitation, the church did so. These new ministers went to work "and soon got a good many into the church, by which means they soon set aside the old Constitution, organized it upon their own plan, raised a Temperance society, and tried to pull or drive us into every unscriptural mire they could. Unwilling to go in this way, we have separated."<sup>47</sup>

With the early 1830s, the controversy over missions and the new evangelicalism led to separations in churches and associations across the South and West. As these schisms occurred, missionary Baptist accused the antissionists of fueling the splits through their opposition to missions. The Primitive Baptists,

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<sup>46</sup> Kemuel Gilbert, "Letter from Franklin County, VA" *The Primitive Baptist* 1:6 (March 26, 1836): 81-83.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph King, "Letter from Wilmington, NC" *The Primitive Baptist* 1:8 (April 28, 1836): 127.

however, placed the blame for the anti-mission splits at the doorsteps of their opponents. Joshua Lawrence, an early polemicist for the new sect, expressed the opinion of many when he charged the Missionary Baptists “with all the discord, disunion, division and weakness that result to the Baptist cause.” In adapting the new methods and institutions as their own, Lawrence stated, the missionary Baptists “*have left us and not we them*, and have gone astray after other gods.” Since the Primitive Baptists saw themselves as preserving the true New Testament faith, the advocates of missions had separated from the true church through their deviation from “the good old way in which the apostles of our old Baptist fathers trod, when comparing with the New Testament.”<sup>48</sup> The perceived violation of New Testament example prompted the Primitive Baptists’ impulse to separate from the missionary Baptists. “Then let the line of division be at once drawn and let us be separate,” wrote Lawrence, “as we have no fellowship for them nor their unscriptural notions . . . Then let us come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing of making merchandise of the saints of God by religion.”<sup>49</sup>

Association after association expressed their opposition to missions in now familiar language. In each of these individual cases, the Primitive Baptists focused on the unscriptural nature of missions and the disruption to their churches caused by the

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<sup>48</sup> Joshua Lawrence, “To the old fashioned United Baptists in the United States,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:1 (October 3, 1836): 1-2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

missionaries and their institutions. The Flint River Association stated that "we believe that it is, the incorporation of the benevolent (so-called) institutions of the day, with the churches, that had produced the confusions of which we complain. And the reason why they have this effect is very obvious. These institutions are composed of persons professing almost, if not quite, every faith, and pursuing (probably) every practice."

While the new institutions would not have aroused their opposition or even notice had they been introduced as a means of improving the general moral tone of the country, the missionary society had made themselves odious to the churches of the association because they "are enforced from the pulpit . . . as a means of grace; consequently should become part and parcel, of the business that should be attended to by every church of Christ." "To these," the association stated, "we cannot yield our assent." The association then resolved "that the benevolent (so-called) institutions of the day . . . are unscriptural, unsupported by divine revelation, and therefore improper" and as a consequence the association had "no fellowship with Associations, churches, or individuals, that are in connection with them."<sup>50</sup>

A meeting in Oglethorpe County, Georgia stated that "we are satisfied in our minds, that the Baptist Convention has been the ground-work of all the schisms as divisions which have separated and alienated us as a denomination." Missions, they said, were "destitute of scripture authority" and the supporters of the new institutions

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<sup>50</sup> "The Baptist Church of Christ at Ephesus, to the Messengers and ministers, composing the Flint River Association," *The Primitive Baptist* 1:6 (March 26, 1836), 84-85.

"have manifested a zeal that has not been well tempered with knowledge, though they boast as the Pharisees of old did, that revivals of religion were only experienced in churches connected with the association." The supporters of missions slandered those "who believe with us that it is God which worketh in us both to will and to do of his own good pleasure," as antinomians. On the other hand, the missionists claimed that they "are so enlarged in our feelings of charity, that our hearts are large enough to save the world."<sup>51</sup>

Primitive Baptists pointed to the attacks and charges of the editors of Missionary Baptist journals as further evidence of their culpability in the split. One article in the *Christian Index* related opposition to mission societies to the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus' new measures, implying that the Primitive Baptists were the cause of trouble because of their opposition to the spirit of God at work in missions. Replying to this charge, *The Primitive Baptist* stated that they based their opposition to new methods not on prejudice but on the close examination of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament. "We know," the editor wrote, "that this precious Testament does not countenance the church in such practices as the new schemers pursue": the creation of non-church institutions with the responsibilities the Scriptures limited to the local church, the mingling of Christian and non Christians, the claim that missions were "instituted means of salvation," and the missionary Baptists cooperation with denominations who held unscriptural doctrines. Such institutions and practices,

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<sup>51</sup> "Report from a Meeting in Oglethorpe County, Georgia," *The Primitive Baptist* 3:1 (January 13, 1838): 1-2.

they believed, were contributing to “the gradual decay of religious liberty of free exercise of conscience; the dying away of that influence, reverence, and dignity, which the church abiding in gospel track would maintain; an abating sense of the necessity of regeneration; a growing belief in the doctrine of justification by works of human righteousness; and a general expulsion of the doctrine of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ.”<sup>52</sup> For these reasons, and not the Primitive Baptist’s refusal to accept the new methods, the antissionists said they were forced to separate from their missionary brethren.

One of the chief sins of the missionary Baptists, in the minds of the Primitive Baptists, was the adoption of the new measures and doctrines of other denominations. Joseph Biggs wrote that “there never were more errors spreading abroad than in these last years” among Baptists in terms of doctrine and practice which violated Scriptural truths as traditionally understood. Doctrinally, Biggs alleged, the missionary Baptists had accepted the arminianized Calvinism of Finney and others. In practice, they had borrowed such “new measures” as camp meetings, the revival meeting, mourner’s seats and anxious benches. For these doctrines and practices the missionary Baptists were beholden to denominations such as the Methodists and New Light Presbyterians, “and not to Christ nor his apostles, nor any of the ancient saints.” By using these new methods, the missionary Baptists “pretend they can help God to convert the sinner . . . saying, he is at the altar, come into it, and we will give Jesus information thereof, and

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<sup>52</sup> *The Primitive Baptist* 1:10 (May 23, 1836): 152-153.



you will get religion. This,” Biggs concluded, “I do not dispute, but it will not be genuine religion, but only the religion of the world, and not Christianity.”<sup>53</sup>

One of the hallmarks of genuine religion rejected by the missionary Baptists, the Primitive Baptists alleged, was a belief in the sovereignty of God in salvation. The Primitive Baptists held strongly to the “absolute sovereignty of God, their heavenly father, in the entire dependence of all his creatures upon Him . . . a doctrine that leads its adherents to abandon all confidence in creature power, and to exercise a living and loving trust in the Most High.” They rejected any doctrine which emphasized the role of man’s free will in salvation, classifying such teachings as forms of rationalism which “places human reason above the plain declarations of the Bible.”<sup>54</sup> It was the adoption of unscriptural ideas of salvation that led to the departures from biblical models in church organization and practice. Cushing Hassell expressed the concept thusly: “The idea of salvation by works caused a dependence on works for salvation. When once confidence in God was lost, then it was placed on man. As soon as a religionist believes that God is unable or unwilling to save sinners, then he sets about the work himself, and soon concedes that he can do it alone without God’s assistance.”<sup>55</sup> Because Missionary Baptists had rejected what Scripture taught about the sovereignty of God in salvation, the Primitive Baptists believed, they had accepted human

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph Biggs, *The Primitive Baptist* 1:1 (January 9, 1836): 9-10.

<sup>54</sup> Hassell, 327.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 749-750.

inventions in the place of Scriptural models of spreading the gospel. In this view, then, the entire missionary enterprise was only part of a more general rejection of Scriptural means of presenting the Gospel. "The divine arrangement for preaching the Gospel," Watson wrote, "does, by no means, suit the judgment, taste and feelings of the *natural man*. It rejects, in too great a degree, human wisdom, learning and planning, as well as pride, ambition and [], and involves the faith of God's elect, in the employment of the plain means which God has ordained."<sup>56</sup> James Osbourn called the preachers of what he felt was a weak doctrine of God's sovereignty "men pleasers." In diluting the doctrine of sovereignty, Osbourn wrote, "religion (not the religion of Jesus Christ to I mean) is brought into such high esteem, as it now is with carnal men" through the new measures. As a result of the success of these measures, "everything now that looks a little like religion is, by most, taken for granted to be the work of God . . . I only wish that these people who made this outcry may be right and I wrong."<sup>57</sup>

Primitive Baptist opposition to the new measures was grounded in a sharp division between the world of history and the world of scripture. The Primitive Baptists, like other primitivist groups, sought to maintain their purity by keeping the division between the two very sharp. One modern student of the sect writes "the division between scripture and history is set deep in the outlook and sensibilities of

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<sup>56</sup> John McClaran Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or, Bible Signs of the Lord's People* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 39.

<sup>57</sup> James Osbourn, *Good Things Aimed At, or Divine Truths Touched On* (Baltimore: W. Warner, 1819), 28.

these Baptists.”<sup>58</sup> A strong demarcation needed to be maintained between these two realms, for the world of man’s activities would only contaminate the world of divine order as embodied in the Gospel church. Mircea Eliade comments that this dichotomy is a particular trait of primitive men. Whatever the sacred writings or mythic stories of a group have to tell, he says “belong to the sphere of the sacred and therefore participates in being.” In the case of the Primitive Baptists, the revelation of God in Scripture constituted the only reality for them when constituting their religious thought. Because of this, the Primitive Baptists saw the missionary Baptists as engaged in activities which would ultimately fail because they were undertaken without reference to the divine model. Eliade has made the observations that primitivists such as the Primitive Baptist believe that “what men do on their own initiative, what they do without a mythical model... is a vain and illussionary activity, and, in the last analysis unreal.”<sup>59</sup>

The Primitive Baptists saw Scripture as inherently superior to any other sources of knowledge because they contained the very models which God had ordained for his church. “The religious books of the ancient Hebrews,” Hassell writes, “are utterly distinct in their time and essence, their spirit and matters, from those of all

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<sup>58</sup> James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr. *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 178.

<sup>59</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 96.

other ancient people.”<sup>60</sup> The Primitive Baptists based their entire argument on their interpretation of Scripture.

For we sincerely believe that every material point in the faith and practice of the church of God should be supported by plain positive scriptural sanction; and that any point which cannot be attested to by two or three scripture proofs that need no explanation is not worth contending for. If scripture must be explained to prove a matter in controversy, the evidence elicited will be nothing better than warped opinion; since a dozen men might place as many different constructions of meaning of the same passage. This kind of evidence of their correctness is all the ‘popular institutions’ have. The scriptures contain, plainly expressed, all things necessary for our conduct and belief. Anything implied added thereto, is an encumbrance, and a reflection upon divine wisdom and cannot but prove to be a departure from the faith.<sup>61</sup>

The problem with their opponents, Hassell wrote, was that while they “have given their consent to the truth of all those sacred writings . . . yet a vast majority of those even deny the power thereof, and by running on in the vain imaginations of their hearts, contradict by the doctrine of the text.”<sup>62</sup>

In making their arguments in favor of the new measures, Thomas Watson accused the missionary preachers of “deceitful handling of the word of God.” “They affect great learning, and insinuate that the true meaning of the original text has not been fully given in out English translation. Stubborn Greek is then made to bend with

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<sup>60</sup> Hassell, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *The Primitive Baptist* 1:1 (Oct. 3, 1836): 8.

<sup>62</sup> Cushing Biggs Hassell, “The Salvation of the Righteous is of the Lord,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:5 (March 12, 1836): 71-72.

a flexibility which adapts itself to the whim, opinion or tenet of the translator.”<sup>63</sup> All of this was an attempt to deceive the faithful as to the true gospel. Many in Baptist churches had been deceived by the missionaries, but this was only evidence of them not belonging to the elect. There was an implication among Primitive Baptists that the elect were not deceived by those who twisted scripture, and thus the Primitive Baptists were the elect. “No one,” Watson wrote, “will contend that the ‘elect of God’ are exempt, in the world, from all religious errors; they do not however, embrace such tenets as are subversive of the fundamental truths of Christianity such as would be incompatible with the light of regeneration and the witness within.”<sup>64</sup> The Primitive Baptists argued that the missionary Baptists, while they claimed to believe the Scriptures, had little or no actual regard for them as standards of faith and practice. “Would you not then take it,” Lawrence wrote, “that all was written necessary for life—and what more—and to furnish the man of God to every good work?.... You plainly infer God has lightened our duty to him, by keeping back a part of the revelation of our duty by command. What sophistry! With these few ideas I leave you on this part; that if the scripture does not reveal the whole duty of man, I may find the balance where I can, in the pope’s bible, Mahomet’s alcoran, the liturgy of the Church of England, or in Took’s heathen mythology.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Watson, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 16-17

<sup>65</sup> Joshua Lawrence, “The North Carolina Whig’s Apology for the Kehukee Association,” (1830) *The Primitive Baptist* 8:1(January 14, 1843): 18.

The elect, the Primitive Baptists contended, protected the truth because they did not attempt to mix the reasoning of men with divine revelation. Human reason, while "a guide to natural science," was "the highest exercise of a frail judgment" when applied to Scriptural revelation. What resulted when reason and scripture were mixed was "prejudiced opinion" to which men "have attached the idea of truth." "If they search the scriptures," the author of an article, "On determining religious truth," asserted, "it is to find such passages by separation and construction that may confirm them in their forestalled and erroneous opinions." Primitive Baptists, on the other hand, approached Scripture according to the "true rules": "(1)Admit nothing as true, without scripture proof; (2)Admit no proof with less than two or three texts; (3)Admit no text as evidence in point, which needs construction or inference in order to become evidence: in other words, the text must affirm the very thing in question."<sup>66</sup>

The Primitive Baptists, however, were not irrationalists. They had no opposition to the use of man's reasoning in the pursuit of human knowledge. But they rejected the use of reason in religion and criticized those who attempted to understand the divine by rational methods. The author of the *Harp of Zion* believed that the wisdom of God dwarfed that of man. Indeed, Christ had come to make wise men fools.

'Twere well, said Jesus, if you could afford  
A standard for the fool or wise man's word;  
Did human thoughts of largest compass stand

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<sup>66</sup> "On Determining Religious Truth," *The Primitive Baptist* 1:2 (January 23, 1836): 23-24.

A text book for the rest, then all were damn'd;  
 Damn'd in the tumult of their steadfast views,  
 A wretchedness the fruit of their best truths.<sup>67</sup>

Reason could not bring men to a knowledge of God and the finite.

Tho' finite man may not know *what is truth*,  
 Reason alone will prove his guarantee,  
 From views disgraceful to the Deity;  
 Nor suffer him to think, the Lord of all,  
 Who spread the heavens and formed the earthly ball—  
 Was thus possessed with the great Deity,  
 The Scorn of wise men, and a life of shame.<sup>68</sup>

A faulty understanding of God's revelation, in the view of the Primitive

Baptists, lead to men wanting to blend reason and Scripture. When faced with Jesus, Nicodemus in Scripture was "struck with sacred awe."

In terms of adulation, he salutes  
 The lowly Jesus, and there from computes  
 The object of his homage, would observe  
 Much deference to himself, and truths reserve  
 Of harsh and vulgar import; or dispense  
 His words selected and of polish's sense.  
 Thus, vain men still, on little learning dress'd.  
 Or rais'd in power, somewhat o'er the rest;  
 Coincides e'en God should speak to him,  
 In soften'd language of a hell and sin;  
 'Tis this, that prompts the liberal support  
 Of Teachers, who their very words assort  
 To please the ear, to fan the innate pride  
 Of fiends incarnate, who *the truth* deride.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> A Regular Baptist, *The Harp of Zion* (Pittsburgh: 1827), 10-11.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

The Primitive Baptists, more than just opposing missions, saw themselves as defending Scriptural truths against the assaults of the advocates of the new measures. These advocates, they argued, attempted to replace the means that God ordained to do His work on earth with those created by men and modeled on worldly institutions. Because they were modeled on the world, they contained elements such as appeal to emotions, emphasis on man's power to choose, and denial of man's depravity. On a more practical level, these worldly institutions revealed their true colors by the attention they paid to raising money for their work.



## CHAPTER 6

### "THESE MEN GRASP ALL THEY CAN!" THE ANTI-SECULAR ARGUMENT OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS

Early in the controversy, opponents of missions attacked the new societies as organizations which made the ability to contribute to the work of a benevolent organization as the standard of piety. Unfortunately for the supporters of the "benevolent empire," the term historians have given to the wide variety of evangelical voluntary societies which existed during this time period, their activities and publications did give the impression that they saw a direct link between religious piety and personal financial success. The proponents of the new organizations made direct appeals to the wealthy for both monetary support and organizational help on the basis of "Christian stewardship," the idea that wealth and possessions were held in trust with God. Men who realized this, in this view, were willing to give of their time, money and talents to the Lord in his cause, thereby demonstrating their piety. The wealthy, one minister declared, had superior intellect and character, possessing great moral virtue, integrity and piety—but only if they acted as good stewards and did not ignore the work of the Kingdom. On the other hand, the leaders and spokesmen for the benevolent empire expressed the ancient view that the poor lacked virtue and were

particularly vulnerable to sin. Many people of this class were poor because of their own indolence and ignorance, they argued, and they forgot moral virtue, wasting their time and money on frivolous amusements and immorality.<sup>1</sup>

Primitive Baptist authors reacted violently against this view of social order. The trustee's view of Christian stewardship, in their view, violated Scriptures which seemed to view the poor, not the wealthy, as special recipients of God's grace. The poor were especially favored by God, they argued, because of the fact that they were lowly and despised by the world. The wealthy, on the other hand, were given power and adulation by the world which allowed them to dominate the poor people of God. Wealth in and of itself was not a sign of God's blessing, nor was poverty a sign of his cursing. The rich were as susceptible to sin as the poor. There was not an economic or class argument levied against society. They defended a traditional religious social order in which all the elect were equal in the eyes of God and His divinely ordered institutions. They limited their opposition to the prominent place wealth, status and commerce-like practices played in missions because it violated their interpretation of Scripture.

The Primitive Baptists rooted their argument against the social bases of missions in the primitivist approach to scripture. Underlying their criticism was a

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1960), 49-50.

concern for purity and simplicity. In Christian primitivism, the categories of purity and simplicity were related to the strict separation between the sacred and profane in worship. It is particularly evident in the plain style and unadorned quality which marked reformed piety from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward. The primitivist element in Christianity was always concerned with the maintenance of purity and held that simplicity through strict discipline and self-denial on both an individual and corporate level in all aspects of the Christian polity was the best way to preserve that purity. Among New England Puritans, the theme of purity and simplicity was reflected in the plain style of preaching, the simplicity and unadorned quality of Puritan meeting houses, and the "suspicion of adornment and artificial complexity" which "forms a kind of center about which much Puritan teaching and practice in the areas of diet, dress, speech, worship, preaching, and the like might be organized suggestively."<sup>2</sup> The primitivist dimension in Puritan thought, which fed into the Baptist primitivism that provided the foundation for Primitive Baptist polemical and irenical writings, was conducive to a view of social order which had little place for modern market economics. While behavior may have been to the contrary, acquisitiveness and obsession with money were seen as violating scriptural norms of purity and simplicity,

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<sup>2</sup> Bozeman, 44-45. Bozeman's study of Puritan primitivism is primarily concerned with the explicitly religious element. The outworking of a primitivist social commentary, puritan attitudes to wealth and commerce are not talked about in Bozeman's work. The index has no listings for money, wealth, economics or commerce.

explicitly breaking commands by Christ not to be concerned with worldly pursuits and attainments.<sup>3</sup>

Such concerns with purity and simplicity came out of the Separate Baptist tradition. They maintained a strict separation between themselves and the surrounding society, adopting simple dress and forswearing the popular amusements of the dominant culture. This brought them into direct conflict with local gentry, particularly in the Southern colonies through their criticism of the gentry and their Anglican defenders. Baptists continued their cultural and social criticisms through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, only to give it up as Baptists became more accepted and the influence of evangelical Christianity grew in the South and West.<sup>4</sup> It was from this Separate tradition of social and cultural criticism that the Primitive Baptists derived their anticommercial, antimonetary language. Unlike their ancestors in the faith, however, the Primitive Baptists did not criticize the behavior and attitudes of society in general. Instead, they focused on what they saw as the greed and avarice

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<sup>3</sup> Do I need to bring in material on the "transition to capitalism."

<sup>4</sup> Christine Heyerman's work on this transitional period is suggestive regarding the issues we are talking about here. She argues that evangelicals struggled for acceptance in a southern society which looked with skepticism and disapproval at their claims and doctrines, both those concerning culture and the nature of religious experience. Only when they dropped their social and cultural criticism after 1830, she argues, did they gain acceptance. Rather than southern society becoming more evangelical, she insists, the evangelicals accommodated themselves to the social and cultural norms of the society. See her *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

of the missionary preachers, the grasping nature of the mission societies, and those societies' practice of allowing all who could pay become members without regard to their spiritual condition.

These criticisms did not arise in a vacuum. Nor did they draw arguments from Scripture in the abstract. In order to understand the Primitive Baptists cultural argument against missions, we have to understand the experiences of the men who were writing. Most of the leaders of the Primitive Baptists were ministers of an older generation, many of whom had endeavored for decades to spread the gospel to places where families had no churches, where infidelity and sin existed without the light of the Truth to illuminate the dark hearts of men, relying on no other means of financial support save that of the work of their own hands and the gracious provision of God. Their lives reflected a different experience, indeed a different attitude, than that seen in the missionary preachers. This older generation of ministers viewed missions through the lenses of these experiences and at the same time filtered their concerns and arguments against missions through these same experiences.

Biographies of frontier Baptist ministers are filled with descriptions of the hard economic conditions they labored under. Wilson Thompson's autobiographical account of his life and ministry reflects both the nature of the call ministers like him experienced and the cost involved in preaching the gospel to the destitute. Thompson, by his recollection, came under the conviction that "God had a work for me to do" in

the Missouri Territory. "I knew very little of the country, the manners of the people, or the state of religion there; but from some cause, unknown to me, my mind had become so led out for the people there, that I could see them, in my imagination, gathering into crowds to meeting, while a wonderful reformation was going on among them. To that place I thought God had directed my steps, and thither I felt that I must go." When his father announced plans to move to the Territory and asked his son and daughter in law to go with him, Thompson saw it as a clear indication of God's call. "From that time I believed that God had opened the way in his providence for me to go," he wrote later, "and that I should see the work manifested in Missouri."<sup>5</sup>

After an arduous and treacherous journey, Thompson and his family arrived in the Missouri Territory in January of 1811. "I now was the possessor," he recalled of his family's economic condition, "of one two-year old colt, one-quarter of a dollar in cash, one bed and bedding, some broken chairs, one small table, some clothing which was badly mildewed, and not a thing to live on even for one day." This lack of money, combined with the high prices demanded on the frontier—"Corn was fifty cents per bushel, wheat one dollar, and pork ten dollars per hundred, and these were very scarce"—forced Thompson to rely on hunting to provide food for his family. "In a short time" he had "procured plenty of venison, turkeys and ducks" and had borrowed a bushel of corn. From that time on, Thompson and his family led a hardscrabble

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, 113-114.

existence, surviving at a bare subsistence level. "I worked for bread," he recalled of those times, "and made sugar and molasses in plenty, and in a short time rented a small farm. The house was filled with flax, and I dressed one half of it for the other half. This gave my wife some business, for she was a spinstress. I repaired my cabin and we moved into it."<sup>6</sup>

Even after having been in Missouri for some time, preaching regularly in churches, Thompson still recorded a desperate economic state. Yet Thompson pointedly wrote, just before he talks about continuing financial problems, of a speaker who stated "Every preacher . . . should love his Lord well enough to obey Him, feeding both lambs and sheep, even if he got no money for it; nay, if it cost him all he had, and even his life beside."<sup>7</sup> In this context, Thompson recalled of his struggle to balance his labor for the Lord and his need to provide for his present physical needs, "I continued to preach from house to house, both day and night, so that I had very little time to work. I was poor and had to work for my family's support. Of corn I had raised a full supply, but I had to depend on day's work for all the other necessities." He often cleared new farmland for planting at night by firelight.<sup>8</sup>

It was with these conditions and experiences in the back of their minds that Primitive Baptist leaders confronted their missionary counterparts. With Scripture as

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 129-131.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 187.

their foundation, but Scripture understood through experience, the Primitive Baptists evaluated the mission societies and found them wanting.

In Thompson's case, his first encounter with the mission society movement came in a direct invitation to join in missionary activity on the frontier at the Indian mission of Isaac McCoy and John Peck. He did not reject the offer out of hand. Indeed, at first he recalled that "my mind became greatly impressed with the vast importance of preaching the gospel to ALL nations." Because of the newness of the institution of the mission society, Thompson undertook to search the Scriptures and inquire of the Lord in prayer over the question. "In my mind I said: 'Lord, shall I know what thy system is and whether this is it or not? O Lord, teach me, and let not my feet be taken in this snare of the crafty.'" The reply came quickly, he recalled, as the Spirit brought to mind the thought, "Search it [the scriptures] carefully and you will find the Lord's plan." "When the last-mentioned test came so forcibly to my mind," he recalled, "I was fully satisfied that this new system of missions was of human origin. It was new, and I knew but very little about it; but the text relieved me, by fully convincing me that I would find the Lord's plan plainly set out in Scriptures....I have never felt that sort of mission fever ever since."<sup>9</sup>

The Primitive Baptist authors' cultural argument against missions had four components. First, they expressed disapproval of the missionary society's methods of soliciting funds. Second, they argued that the societies were guilty of 'Priestcraft' and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 274-280.



the creation of a 'moneyed ministry'. Third, they argued that the missionary societies disrupted the social order of the churches as prescribed in Scripture. Fourth, the missionary's obsession with money, in the view of their opponents, proved that they were not of the 'true church' but were associated with 'false churches' identified as having their origins from the Catholic Church, which they identified as the 'Mother of Harlots.'

The first major criticisms the Primitive Baptists leveled against the missionary Baptists concerned the methods they employed in raising funds for missions. The missionary preachers, John Leland wrote, used the manipulation of people's emotions to fill their treasuries, holding before the people "the gods of India...and the immolation of the Hindoos are pointed out in all the horrors of language." Such was the greed of these preachers, Leland accused them of targeting even the young, with "children...exhorted to cast their mites, with encouragement that every cent may save a soul." They impressed upon all ages the idea of sacrifice for the cause of missions "as if the salvation of the world depended upon a priest-fund as much as it did on the promise made to Abraham."<sup>10</sup>

The emotion-filled appeal for contributions for missions that their supporters used offended another Baptist minister, John Taylor, as he described in his short tract *Thoughts on Missions* in 1820. After a general introduction concerning the rise of missions, Taylor targets strong words against an unidentified missionary from India--

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<sup>10</sup> John Leland, *The Writings of John Leland* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 493.

obviously Luther Rice himself. Taylor first encountered Rice in 1815, when the missionary's travels took him to the Elkhorn Association, near Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>11</sup> Taylor remembered Rice well, "A tall, pale looking, well dressed young man, with all the solemn appearance of one who was engaged in the work of the Lord." At the meeting Rice spoke on the text, "Thy Kingdom Come," and Taylor recalled that he "spoke some handsome things about the Kingdom of Christ, but every stroke he gave seemed to mean money."<sup>12</sup> In his attempts to raise money, Taylor accused Rice of resorting to the emotional manipulation of his audience. Rice, by Taylor's recollection, described the presence of angels hovering over the assembly, ready to "bear the good tidings to heaven of what we were then doing, in giving our money of the instruction and conversion of the poor heathens."<sup>13</sup> After this declaration from the pulpit, "twenty men, previously appointed, moved through the assembly with their hats." The actions of this "modern Tetzels," as Taylor labeled him, yielded about \$200.00.<sup>14</sup>

Taylor's travels brought him into contact with the Baptist mission in the Missouri Territory, an encounter that provided him with evidence that missionaries exaggerated the extent of their depravations and needs. What he found stood in stark

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<sup>11</sup> John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 52-53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

contrast to the reports and letters coming from the area. "What a mighty noise is made in missionary writings," he writes, "about the sufferings and privations of these missionaries . . . But I consider the chief of it to be pharisaical boast." He found no evidence of the privations and difficulties described in the denominational journals, but instead that they had "monopolized the whole country . . . and are living in style, in the flourishing town of St. Louis and St. Charles, without any other anxiety or trouble, then are seen in other gay gentlemen, except disappointment in not getting as much money as meets their extensive views."<sup>15</sup> Only a desire for money above the desire to spread the Gospel could explain the exaggerations in the mission literature and the manipulations of Baptist congregations by mission-minded preachers.

Like John Taylor, Daniel Parker was another frontier Baptist preacher who objected to the seeming obsession the missionists had with money. Parker argued that the Missionists reduced the Gospel to a commodity to be traded. "It seems like making the sacred character of religion," says Parker, "no greater than the merchandise of this world, and putting it in a long line of trade and traffic."<sup>16</sup> Like Leland and Taylor, Parker was very critical of the appeals made by missionists for money. "We see the mission society opening the door and using every exertion to collect money from the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 56. This is the Indian Mission of Isaac McCoy that Wilson Thompson was invited to join.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, 13-14.

world” for the purpose of ushering in the Kingdom of God, which in Parker’s view could only come through God’s activity.<sup>17</sup>

Along with criticisms of their methods the Primitive Baptists questioned the motives and character of the missionary preachers themselves. In the minds of the antimissionists, the major problem with mission societies was not their goal, the spreading of the gospel to the nations, but the character of the individuals who were commissioned by the societies. These ministers did not resemble the examples of a called gospel minister they found in Scripture. Frequent comparisons were made between modern ministers and the Apostles with the former found wanting. Instead, the Primitive Baptists saw the missionaries as modern examples of Baalam and Judas from Scripture or priests of the “Mother of Harlots,” the Church of Rome.

Among the earliest Baptist opponents of missions, John Leland focused on the character of the missionary preacher in his criticism of the mission enterprise. Leland was indisputably one of the great Separate Baptist divines in the eighteenth century, primarily known for his strenuous efforts on behalf of disestablishment first in Virginia and later in Connecticut. So famous was Leland among American Baptists that his opposition to the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions and the developing denominational scheme must have come as a complete surprise. Yet his opposition came early. In a sermon preached in Philadelphia at the time of the 1814 convention, Leland used Israel’s demand that Samuel anoint them a King to warn his fellow

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

Baptists of the dangers of seeking to be like other denominations. This initial warning grew into a concerted, steady opposition to missions throughout the remaining years of Leland's life.

An open attack on missionary societies first came from Leland's pen in 1818. Using the voice of "A correspondent from Palestine," Leland drew attention to what he saw as the main problem with the new organizations, that being "the unceasing salutation, and that in a great variety of shapes, which are made for money, by your missionary societies."<sup>18</sup> For Leland, this emphasis on money was one sign of 'Priestcraft' in missions, "the rushing into the sacred work for the sale of ease, wealth, honor and ecclesiastical dignity."<sup>19</sup> He wrote, "whether they plead lineal succession or divine impulse, their cause is directed for self-advantage." Such men represented religion backed up "by solemn threatening of fires, gibbets, or the flames of hell," directed at "those who do not adhere to their institutions." Those threats combined with "good words and fair speeches," they deceive the people and "establish their importance beyond the reach of investigation."<sup>20</sup> In contrast stand the first century Christian preachers. Unlike modern preachers, these first preachers "had a missionary spirit . . . without missionary societies and missionary funds." They made no direct pleas for money, but instead "trusted to providence for their food and raiment,

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<sup>18</sup> Leland, 471-72.

<sup>19</sup> Definition of Priestcraft.

<sup>20</sup> Leland, 484.

laboring and working with their own hands.” They understood the true message of their Lord, “that his kingdom is not of this world.”<sup>21</sup> In comparison with the early church the exertions of the missionary Baptists, Leland argues, manifested a “great degree of craft.”<sup>22</sup> In making such an accusation Leland attempted to link the modern mission society with the favorite enemy of American Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church.

In a more subtle way, John Taylor made the same connection. The missionary preachers, he stated, were like “Daniel’s little horn . . . more stout than his fellows.” “Daniel’s little horn” was a reference to one of the beasts seen in Daniel 7:8 and 20, which bible commentators at the time linked to the Papacy. The chief characteristic of the little horn, according to the Book of Daniel, was that it had “a mouth which spoke pompous words” and an “appearance more greater than his fellows.”<sup>23</sup> “Stout” is the primary way Taylor characterizes these men, the word meaning “proud, haughty and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>22</sup> The word ‘craft’ as Leland uses it meant “Skill or art applied to deceive or overreach; deceit, guile, fraud, cunning.” The word however had several other meanings that would have resonated with a nineteenth century reader. “A skillful contrivance, a device, artifice, or expedient.” By using the word craft, Leland is trying to get across a number of ideas. First, the missionary preachers are attempting to deceive and defraud their listeners through their speaking, their education, and their deportment. More broadly, the entire missionary enterprise is nothing more than an artifice meant to enrich a few who have set themselves up as priests. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1128.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel 7:8, 20. Translation used, *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). In the *King James Version* the word “pompous” is translated “stout”.

arrogant.” Missionary preachers exhibited many talents, he granted, but they exhibited a pride and haughtiness that Taylor ascribed to their “approbation by the great Board.”<sup>24</sup> The well-educated missionaries they commissioned and sent out were much different ministers than Taylor. “These men,” he said, referring to missionary preachers, “grasp all they can, from saints and sinners.” Such ministers were nothing like the great apostle Paul, who in spite of his being held before men as a missionary example, “counted no man’s silver, or gold, or apparel. How unlike these men whose hands are always stretched out for money, and like the horse-leech, ever crying, *give, give!*!”<sup>25</sup>

The author of *The Harp of Zion*, a massive reduction of the life of Christ to verse written by “a regular [Primitive] Baptist”, said of the missionary preacher “Thyself, a sample of a host to some/In after times; who, throe’ the earth shall run/As sent of God, and moved from above,/When *gold*’s their God, and only *self* they love.”<sup>26</sup> The author of *The Harp of Zion* also criticizes the missionists for merchandising the gospel.

All but my sheep, do only force their way  
 Into the fold, to make the sheep their prey,  
 Make merchandize of *pasture* and of flock—  
 Insult—betray—and artfully provoke,  
 To their BASE PROJECTS, those who think no guile,

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<sup>24</sup> Taylor, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 54-55

<sup>26</sup> *The Harp of Zion*, 19.

And glory in the infamy and spoil.<sup>27</sup>

To Joshua Lawrence, an early polemicist for the Primitive Baptists and a founder of *The Primitive Baptist*, the chief newspaper of the sect in the South, the mark of the missionary preacher was this constant begging for money. "Are there not hundreds of men," he asked, "scouring our country, under the character of ministers of the gospel, who by good works, fair speeches, subscriptions, persuasive begging, selling titles into various societies, and thereby collecting vast sums of money[?]" Scripture did not speak one word in favor of such activities, Lawrence said, but instead condemned "such merchandising and covetousness, and greediness of filthy lucre in religion." Men who were involved in such activities as the missionaries were "false apostles," for the Scriptures confirmed that "such lovers of money err from the faith." These men raised money, not for "the poor, the fatherless, and the widow and helpless" as the Lord had done, but instead for the support of missionary preachers which Lawrence described as "a set of hale, hearty young idlers, strutting in broadcloth, gigs, boots, and gold watches, who are becoming a curse to the moral and civil world." In this statement Lawrence uses language reminiscent of the Separate Baptists of the eighteenth century who criticized the ministers of the established church for conforming to the pattern of the culture instead of the strictures of the Gospels. He extends this to the ministers of his day who "instead of suffering nakedness, shame, and want, have become at length men of style and fashion, pictures

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<sup>27</sup> A Regular Baptist, *The Harp of Zion*. (Pittsburgh: 1827), 39.



of elegance, and pride, and pensioners of begging and trading societies.” The ministers who supported missions, theological seminaries, and other benevolent enterprises, while “decked in the robe of honesty and benevolence,” were “mantled with sincerity in religion for the sake of gain” for the purpose of “merchandising in religion.”<sup>28</sup>

The missionary scheme not only had no scriptural support, in the minds of Primitive Baptists, but it threatened the integrity of the Gospel ministry. “What kind of examples does a minister show to the flock,” Lawrence asked, “when he takes such high cuts and deceptive measures to get money, that the common honesty of a gentleman would blush at?”<sup>29</sup> Another writer also questioned the honesty of the missionary preachers.

If begging money from honest laborers and the poor, is so, according to the laws of God, by a hearty, hale young man—if this is honesty, God keep me from that honesty. If to be employed by a society to beg for money, and tell the people it is to send the gospel to the destitute, and they give the money for that purpose, and the beggar not tell them that he and the society have made a bargain for a dollar a day to beg for them—and when the beggar returns with his booty he gets a great part—reader, is this providing things honest in the sight of God and men? And if a society should hire an agent at \$40 a month, to go about and form societies, and he promise them preaching or to send them preachers for their money, and send none—would this be honesty? Would it not be lying for gain? Say, if a man should do this, would it be providing things honestly in the sight of God or men? North Carolinians know whether any or more such things have been done or not by priests.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence, “To the old-fashioned United Baptists,” 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, “North Carolina Whig’s Apology,” 33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Money, Lawrence asserted, inevitably had a corrupting influence on those who appealed for it, with such “priests in black broadcloth, crackling boots, gold watch chains, and painted silver-headed canes” growing to believe that their congregations “must maintain them in idle luxury and superfluity of dress, and that work would hurt their fair hands and take off their studies from bombast and pulpit pomposity.”<sup>31</sup>

One Primitive Baptist author, James Osbourn, referred to the missionary preachers as “Pirates” who “carry with them dangerous cargo.” While there had always been such ministers, Osbourn asserted that “perhaps at no time, have the robbers of God and man been more numerous or more mischievous, than they are now.” They put on great signs of devotion “and by this means they beguile and seduce unstable souls.” They “compass the whole seas for pillage” and are “continually fitting out her vessels and sending them into all seas far and near.” These pirates of the gospel do not operate singularly but instead “are all confederated together.” “By this coalition, great exploits are performed at sea, and by the men engaged in it, it is called *gospel prosperity*; but in the scriptures of truth, it does by the name of, ‘Lo here and lo there.’”<sup>32</sup> A reply by the editor of *The Primitive Baptist* to a pro-mission association’s circular letter in support of the new societies prompted him to observe of the missionary preachers, “What is the sign of their call to the ministry? 1<sup>st</sup>. Every

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>32</sup> James Osbourn, *Tidings of Joy From the Hill of Zion* (Baltimore: J.D. Toy, 1833), 51.

power of their souls being filled with the love of money, which is the root of all evil. 2d. To put on a cloak of hypocrisy. 3d. To beg well. 4<sup>th</sup>. Put on two coats. 5<sup>th</sup>. From the study of Dr. Gill's divinity and exposition of the scriptures and others. 6<sup>th</sup>. The glory of the schemes of the day, &c.....All such religion is nothing better than popery.<sup>33</sup>

The paradigmatic missionary preacher the Primitive Baptists found in Scripture, usually in the person of different ones who preached the gospel for the sake of money. Of all the possible examples Primitive Baptist authors could cite from Scripture to describe the character of a minister corrupted by money, none proved more useful than the figure of Judas. The betrayer of Christ was, after all, the treasurer of the apostles. His motive for betrayal was gain. In the same way, the missionary preachers betrayed what the Primitive Baptists understood as the true Gospel and abandoned the model of the primitive church for wealth, power and position. The author of *The Harp of Zion* described the link in verse.

This said arch Judas, not that once he cared,  
Or if the poor were fed, or if they starved.  
The name of charity, or Christ he would press  
Into his service, that he might possess  
Himself of money. This dear aim, here was crossed—  
He deep deplored that all these pence he lost;  
Nor could he rest, until he made it good—  
And to that end, he sold the Saviour's blood.  
Such Judas was—and such was Judas' God!  
No lack of likeness in the present brook  
Of begging teachers—who compass earth and sea,

<sup>33</sup> Reply by the Editor to the circular letter of the Contentnea Association, *The Primitive Baptist* 1:5 (March 12, 1836), 72-73.

So they get money for *self* charity.  
 They cry for gold—rebuke—exhort and treat—  
 Nor can they *good* perform, till that they get!<sup>34</sup>

A few lines later, the author continues in an even harsher vein.

*E'en Judas* here, exalts *himself* above  
 The God of Jacob, in his claims to love!  
 Ten thousand thousand, shall the world afford,  
 Who, Judas-like, shall rise above the Lord;  
 More full in charities—in grace still higher—  
 Save all the world and Devils from their fire.  
 Should not my doctrine and claims agree,  
 They'll fill the measure of *their* charity,  
 By cloaking *that*, and telling lies for me.<sup>35</sup>

Drawing the connection between Judas and the missionary preachers of his day, the author said that Judas appeared more committed to the work of ministry than Christ, “and yet he was a devil. Who may not after this,” he comments, “suspect mere appearances! May we not suspect those popular Baptists D.D.s who build splendid, *round* meeting houses in large commercial cities, and chat orphan and widow, friend and stranger, out of 50,000 dollars to accomplish it! Or who build Baptist colleges and theological seminaries, and defraud the community out of 100,000 dollars.”<sup>36</sup>

Primitive Baptist authors, as we have seen, were constantly pointing to their interpretation of Scripture and their understanding of the early church to “prove” that the new methods were unscriptural. In the case of money, they founded their social

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<sup>34</sup> *The Harp of Zion*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

argument on Scripture. The existence of mission boards and appeals of hired ministers for money, Lawrence and others argued, was at variance with such Scriptural examples as the oft-cited example of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2, the commissioning and sending out of the two apostles as the first missionaries to the Gentiles. "Don't your plan," Lawrence asks, "give missionaries money on starting out; don't you pay them when out; don't they go with the expectation from fair promises of boards of directors, of getting more?" Unlike the mission board system, the Scriptural pattern that Lawrence and other Primitive Baptists found saw support arising in natural course of the spreading of the gospel, as people were led by the Holy Spirit to contribute to the support of the ministers and their work. "Did the people or church at Antioch," Lawrence asks, "give Paul and Barnabas any on starting to the heathen; did they send him any; did they beg for them to support them in preaching the gospel to the heathen? You or any other man, that will read the scriptures for himself without your glasses, will see that the ancient Christians done none of this merchandising to support the gospel ministry."<sup>37</sup>

Lawrence appealed to scripture to describe the social status and duties of the Gospel minister. He drew evidence with which he asserted Christ's commands to his apostles not to make prior plans or preparations as they went out but instead to trust in God's provision for their support as paradigmatic for the gospel minister of his time. In so doing, Lawrence asserted the non-scriptural character of organizations which, in

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence, *The North Carolina Whig's Apology*, 34.

their appeals to money, appeared to him to ignore those commands. "No, Nehemiah," he wrote to his opponent, "one of two things you must approve, or give up the point—that the directions of Christ to his apostles were not intended for directions for other ministers, or show Christ has changed his plan and give other directions to after ministers." Neither assertion, Lawrence, said, could Nehemiah make from Scripture; therefore, Lawrence concluded "missionaries don't go...in the same manner as the command of Christ directs, without scrip or purse."<sup>38</sup> In comparing the missionary's plan with the commands of Christ to the apostles to go forth "without scrip, bread, coats, or shoes," it was evident to Lawrence and others that "the missionary plan is exactly contrary to Christ's plan—you compare it with the scriptures and you will see, it is in opposition to take no scrip, and at best none but a man's own—not to beg, and devise title selling plans to get money to go with."<sup>39</sup>

Not only did the mission societies effect the character and call of ministers of the Gospel, the Primitive Baptists argued that the entire scheme disrupted the social order of the churches as set forth in Scripture, an order which they insisted placed greater power and glory on the poor and simple of the world rather than the rich. This is not so much an argument from class as it is an argument based on their understanding of the Gospel's operation in society. Christ had come to exalt the poor over the rich, using the former to build His kingdom. The missionary scheme, through

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 21.

their emphasis on money, education, and status, threatened to displace the poor from their rightful place in the Kingdom. It was the fear of the disruption of the gospel order that motivated the attacks by the Primitive Baptists on the boards. Corruption of the true church, in their opinion, came through the person of the missionary preacher. The missionary preacher, however, worked at the behest of the mission boards. He was not a lone force, therefore, but the instrument of an even larger, corrupting agency.

The primary form of their corruption, according to the Black Rock Address, was the creation of a bureaucratic organization. The missionary societies' bureaucracy restricted the preaching of the gospel to a certain group. Time was, the authors wrote, when ministers felt the call of Christ to travel and preach among the destitute as well as those congregations who called them to service as their pastors. "There was then," they conclude, "more preaching of the gospel among the people at large, according to the number of Baptists, than has ever been since the age of missions commenced."<sup>40</sup> This situation arose because "the missionary, instead of going into such neighborhoods as Christ's ministers used to visit, where they would be most likely to have an opportunity of administering food at the poor of the flock, seeks the most popular villages and towns, where he can attract the most attention, and do the most to promote the cause of missions and other popular institutions."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Berry, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Not only did the mission societies restrict the preaching of the gospel, keeping it from the poor and needy, but they promoted an internal composition of churches which stood at variance to that established by Christ. Unlike the "gospel society or church . . . composed of baptized believers" in which the "poor is placed on equal footing with the rich, and money is of no consideration" in membership, the mission societies were organized so that "the unregenerate, the enemies of the cross of Christ" could be members along with the regenerate.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Parker wrote that the mission societies were guilty "not only mingling with the wicked of the world, but with other professors of religion which we believe is the daughter of the mother of harlots, and consequently in the system of religion which is in part of the antichristian spirit, and if so, in that part the enemy of Christ."<sup>43</sup> The "mingling," as they saw it, of Christian and non-Christian in the new societies, based membership not on one's experience of salvation but upon one's ability to pay the subscription fees. Speaking of The Baptist General Tract Society, one Primitive Baptist editor stated that while the society had the word "Baptist" in the title, "any person, without respect even to morals, may become a member." An individual is "encouraged, by the paying of money, to become the member of a society, professedly religious, without any pre-requisite, human or divine," unlike church membership which required a credible profession of the inward work of grace and a public Baptist. Such membership was unconditional "and for life,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 30-31

<sup>43</sup> Parker,



too, without regard to any course of conduct or behavior hereafter.” “To us,” he concluded “the prospect of spreading the gospel by such means and by such a society is not encouraging, while the wickedest of the wicked be Directors in the means of spreading it.”<sup>44</sup>

What resulted, the Primitive Baptists said, was that “administration [of the mission societies] is all lodged in the hands of a few, who are distinguished from the rest, by great swelling titles.”<sup>45</sup> These titles, given to those who had bought their way into the societies, created social divisions among Christians where none had existed before. This, they felt, violated the basic equality of all men before God. The editor of *The Primitive Baptist* pointed to the missionary’s practice of “conferring and selling of flattering and world-honoring titles upon men, and admitting the unregenerate and vicious into societies termed religious, and raising them to different grades for money” alongside their “practice of begging from all classes of people” among other things which led to the conflict among Baptists.<sup>46</sup>

The belief in the egalitarian nature of the early church was entirely in keeping with the primitivist tradition among Baptists. Joshua Lawrence wrote in the introductory issue of *The Primitive Baptist* “We believe the Missionary Baptists have deviated from the good old way . . . when compared with the New Testament, both in

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<sup>44</sup> Editor, “The Baptist General Tract Society,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:6 (March 26, 1836), 92-93.

<sup>45</sup> Berry, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Editor, *The Primitive Baptist* 1:10 (May 23, 1836), 152-153.

doctrine and in ministerial practice; making money the mainspring of ministerial motion, instead of love to Christ and souls—which we consider a great corruption.” For this reason, Lawrence called for other antission associations to join with them to “condemn in toto church traffic and merchandising in religion as unscriptural. . . . Then let us come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing of making merchandize of the saints of God by our religion; but leave the begging system to those who are too lazy to work, and choose to aggrandize themselves by begging and living on another man’s labors, and thus violating the old Gospel law.”<sup>47</sup>

The missionary scheme, in Lawrence’s view, was just the newest manifestation of ‘moneyed religion.’ Examples of moneyed religion could be found in the Scriptural examples of “Secham, Gaharia, the prophets of Jezebel, Judas, Demas, those that followed for loaves and fishes, Balaam after Balaak’s silver, the popes and priests of some, persons and bishops of England, . . . and others that should take merchandise of you, by deceiving the hearts of the simple.”<sup>48</sup> Lawrence also pointed to the ministers of the colonial Established churches, “those hired dumb dogs that could not bark without tobacco, like some other that can’t bark without money—proud, avaricious, insatiate, unfeeling, idle tyrants that could see men and women lie in prison for their ministerial taxes, without the emotion of heart that characterizes the Christian.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lawrence, “To the Old Fashioned United Baptists,” 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence, *A North Carolina Whig’s Apology*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

"Take these," he concluded, "as belonging brothers to moneyed religion, with death in the pot; for moneyed religion and gain by godliness, is the religion of men and the devil . . . For moneyed religion ends in blood, and that covetous priests and the devil have shown themselves blood suckers I need not prove."<sup>50</sup> Another Primitive Baptist author wrote in the same vein as Lawrence when he compared the suffering of early Baptists with "the present moneyed system of usurpation by Conventional authority" to send missionaries throughout the United States and the rest of the world. They were

Like incendiaries to plunder and mar the peace of the Churches, which under God have been long planted and watered by his servants and all in peace. But when those money hunters came and lugged in the cause of God and the heathen to help them, and Demetrius like: crying out help from every quarter, peace fled from this happy people, because they listened to those busy dreamers, in their schemes to get money, not knowing they were the prophet's dumb dogs.<sup>51</sup>

The rhetoric of the Primitive Baptists concerning money linked the new society's pursuit of contributions with fears of the re-establishment of a State Church and the reduction of the "True Church" into bondage. Charles Henderson, in a letter to *The Primitive Baptist* expressed these concerns when he wrote "the advocates of the new speculating schemes of the day, have made some strong exertions to pervert the truth through this country, and carry the servants of God back again into

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>51</sup> A. Coemption, *The Primitive Baptist* 3:1 (Jan 3, 1838), 4-5.

bondage.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, another editorial wrote that “law religion has been established in so many countries, and a devouring priesthood has outlived so many ages and revolutions. The great perfection of literature, the maturity of the arts and sciences, and the unbounded liberty enjoyed in our country, have enabled the priesthood to practice with more refinement, and consummate policy. To the chimeral subject of converting the heathen and the world to Christianity is attached not only a vast and absorbing importance, but also a benevolence expansive and devout; and by representations painted in vivid colors of heathen woe and Christian duty, avarice is kept out of sight, and people are prepared to hear with pleasure, Pray and Pay. This is the almost universal motto of the strange societies of the day.”<sup>53</sup>

The author of *The Harp of Zion* expressed the Primitive Baptists’ disdain for the new measures linked to the pursuit of money in verse, using Jesus’ cleansing of the temple from the moneychangers as his inspiration.

Full well that scene our modern forms describe,  
Or rampant vanity or wounded pride.  
The ample temple, fretted aisles and dome,  
The Gilded pulpit, and the organ’s tone,  
Feed thousand’s vanity, and bid them rise  
In self-esteem, above the very skies.

The Primitive Baptists’, in this author’s view, were the upholders of truth, the ones who challenged the claims of the advocates of the missionary societies: “But should

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Henderson, “Letter from Morgan County, Tennessee,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:9 (May 14, 1836), 143.

<sup>53</sup> Editor, “Pray and Pay,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:11 (June 11, 1836), 169.

some one by accident appear/Within their temple, and *the truth* declare.” Their actions in condemning missions and the other new measures provoked the wrath of the missionists and their allies.

How would their pride, insulted, urge them on,  
To curse the doctrine and the preacher stone  
With calumny—contempt, and each bad name,  
Until they murdered all his honest fame.<sup>54</sup>

In the eyes of the Primitive Baptists the missionaries and other advocates of the numerous benevolent institutions being formed were corrupting the gospel because of the role money played in their activities. Unlike ministers of the past who labored for souls without pay, who struggled to eke out an existence while preaching the word of God, ministers of the modern missionary system did so for money. They sought a high social and economic position, using the ministry as a way of improving their status rather than doing the work of God. In turning their churches and missions into commercial establishments, the missionaries endangered religious freedom.

These claims by Primitive Baptists concerning the greed of the missionaries had no basis in fact. Missionary reports did in fact report deprivations and appealed for funds for the very reason that such support was needed. Many of the ministers on the frontier relied as much on their own efforts as on the sums forwarded them from the boards who supported them. Overseas, missionaries labored in foreign lands in hazardous conditions for paltry sums and will few converts. Few if any young men

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<sup>54</sup> *The Harp of Zion*, 37-38.

answering what they felt was the call to enter the mission field were motivated by thoughts of riches and increasing their social position.

The Primitive Baptist's antimonetary argument against missions, while not based in reality, had an important symbolic value for their polemic. In a society where commercialization was increasing, where one of the major political arguments of the day was over a national bank, concern over the corrupting influences of money was widespread. Money in religion symbolized the corruption Primitive Baptists believed was infiltrating the churches in the form of Arminian doctrines which denied the sovereignty of God in salvation and new measures which replaced divine writ with human opinion as the standard of faith and practice. From these same sources came appeals for money from young ministers and missionaries who received support from these new and corrupt institutions. Thus to the Primitive Baptists, the link between the two was clear.

Clear in their own mind too was the role of the Primitive Baptists. Because of their rejection of the new measures, their refusal to participate in or support missionary societies and other institutions, and their dismissal of the role of money in religious activities, the Primitive Baptists placed themselves apart from the rest of the denominations of the time. In so doing, they created a mythic history concerning their link to the church of the New Testament which cast themselves as the sole legitimate defenders of the pure, primitive doctrine of the apostolic church.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE REMNANT CHURCH IN PRIMITIVE BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY.

By the late 1830s, Primitive Baptist leaders had formalized the terms of their polemic against missions and the churches who supported them. Yet their polemic is not enough to understand why their opposition culminated in schism in individual churches and associations. As the missionary Baptist's argument in favor of missions had a particular view of the church and history underlying it, so too did the Primitive Baptists' opposition to missions. The Primitive Baptists saw church history as a story of corruption and decline from the primitive model they found in the New Testament, a common theme among Restorationist groups in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Primitive Baptists, however, differed from such groups as the Stone-Campbellites because of their view of history and the church. While the true church had been suppressed, Primitive Baptists claimed, it had never disappeared. Rather it had survived as a remnant of which the Primitive Baptists were the true heirs. They were part of a succession of churches throughout history which had opposed the profane system of religion embodied in the Church of Rome and now had its latest manifestation in the mission system.

Popular evangelicalism of the early 1800s was marked by a decidedly nondenominational spirit. One of the major features of the revivals was the lack of importance of denominational labels. Ironically, a number of new sects and denominations formed which claimed to desire to unite all Christians, rejecting traditional creeds in favor of an extreme biblicism. This rejection of creedal differences among specific groups grew out of a subjective understanding of the church. The new revivalists saw the church as a voluntary society made up of individuals united because of a common religious experience, that of conversion. It had no special status as an institution. Most Christians accepted the concept of the invisible church, a mystical union of all believers united across visible lines. The Primitive Baptists, on the other hand, rejected the very concept of the invisible church and developed a high view of the visible church. They based their view on an understanding of the church as an instituted decreed by God before time. The visible church was not a voluntary gathering of the saved. It was the divinely ordained institution through which and into which God gathered the whole of His elect.

Mircea Eliade's emphasis on the centrality of cosmogony—the creation of reality—for religious systems help us to understand the place of the remnant church in Primitive Baptist ecclesiology. He says that the cosmogony “is the paradigmatic model for all other times . . . for the times specifically belonging to the various categories of existing things.”<sup>1</sup> The Primitive Baptists relied on a model for

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<sup>1</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 76.



understanding their world based what happened before the creation of the world—the choosing of the elect, the preordaining of the death of Christ on the cross, and the divine ordering of the church. These events formed the paradigm for the progression of sacred history after creation. For the Primitive Baptists, all they believed and practiced originated in the time of origins in eternity. The Primitive Baptist John Watson wrote “Time, in regard to eternity, is like, the diverging of a small stream from the great ocean, which after running a long course, again discharges itself into the same fountain.” The great ocean is the eternity of God’s existence before the physical world was made. Time is the human dimension of history. It is to eternity that the sacred belongs—the sacred being the doctrines and practices of the Primitive Baptists as the current manifestation of the remnant church. Watson characterized human history as “a mere divergence of eternity,” while sacred history is “a manifestation of the eternal purpose or counsel of the divine will from which all things take their shape and destiny.”<sup>2</sup>

Sacred history and all that it contains is the product of God’s foreknowledge, and is thus “commensurate with eternity.” The church, as part of sacred time “has no beginning or end” but like God is eternal. All else which is the product of human history “had a beginning, and will have an end...But none of these things are so with God.”<sup>3</sup> For the Primitive Baptists, then, the defining moment of sacred history came

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<sup>2</sup> Watson, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

not at Calvary but in the primordium. Watson believed that the predestination of the elect before creation was the primary reference for understanding the history of the church.<sup>4</sup> It was this act which served as the beginning of the Church. Thus, in the mind of the Primitive Baptist, the church had always existed and would always exist. It was not a product of human history and therefore could not be changed. It was determined and directed by divine action in the past. "Primitive Baptist religion," says a modern student of the sect, "is a religion of the *a priori*; the most decisive event of all was God's before the creation of the world, nature and time. ... This view implicates a view of history that does not impute to any historical event constituent meaning or purposes of salvation."<sup>5</sup>

According to the Primitive Baptists, everything spoken of in scripture was known and formulated by God before time began. In this view, the plot of redemptive history has been preordained, the outcome first and finally only known to God.<sup>6</sup> God reveals the flow of his divine plan through Scripture, which is the record of sacred history with no connection to the flow of human history. Scripture to the Primitive Baptist was a revelation in time of things determined by divine decree before creation. Our knowledge of God and his activity in the world, in Primitive Baptist thought, is strictly limited to what God reveals of himself through the reading of Scripture. Such

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4. Watson lists these transactions on pp. 9-10 of the same work.

<sup>5</sup> Peacock, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 89.

knowledge of God's plan comes only to the elect through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> The true church, composed of God's elect, are the special possessors of revelation. All other institutions denominated as churches are mere human institutions with no divine authority. The structure and organization of the church was preordained. Because of its origins in eternity, it had no relationship to the realm of history and human action. Because of its separation from the sphere of mankind's recreative function, man had no right to add or subtract anything from this divine ordering of the church. "The best plans for the management of temporal affairs may often be beneficially changed," Watson wrote, "but they [the Primitive Baptists] contend that as the Church of Christ is a divine institution, the rules and regulations given by the Lord for its government, should not be altered, taken from or added to. They admit no authority for changing any of these things, since the sacred canon was closed."<sup>8</sup>

One of the main threats to the apostolic model posed by the new institutions was the end of the autonomy of the local congregation.

The independent or congregational polity or government of each local church, subject only to the headship of Christ; all the local apostolic churches being united, by no outward bond of force, but by an inward bond of love...A visible church is always in Scripture a local body.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>8</sup> Watson, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Hassell, 291.

The emphasis on the local congregation placed the Primitive Baptists in a long American tradition. The church, as an independent body, symbolized for the Primitive Baptists the freedom of the individual believer before God, a freedom founded in each one's capacity to know the divine through the direct revelation of the spirit. "Hierarchies and synods," they believed, "are unscriptural, tyrannous usurpation's which have, through the ages, inflicted grievous wrongs among the people." It was an important part of their conception of a remnant Church that there was "the fraternal equality, the essential priesthood, of all the members." There was no place in their churches for titles or a special hierarchy. From their own ranks, "they chose to office among them those of their number whom they perceived to be already qualified thereunto by the Spirit of God." The only officers allowed to the church were those constituted in Scripture, those of Elders, Pastors and Deacons. Primitive Baptists did have their associations, but they characterized them as "general meetings of churches, or brethren from different churches, for the purpose of Divine worship and mutual edification." Associations could not assume for themselves "the functions of an individual church, such as admitting, disciplining or excluding members of a church, or electing or disciplining the officers of a church. It cannot be repeated too often that *each gospel church is, according to Christ and His Apostles, the highest ecclesiastical authority on earth.*"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 293

The concept of the remnant church composed of the elect allowed the Primitive Baptists to place in themselves in church history. They were not, as their opponents insisted, backwoods antinomians who rejected the new methods because they were poor and uneducated. In their own minds, the Primitive Baptists were the only guardians of the truths contained in Scripture. Others who departed from the pure model were likened by the author of the *Harp of Zion* to the crowd who abandoned Christ in John 7:

Indignant, now the multitude depart—  
The words of Christ had cut them to the heart.  
The false professor found his guile explor'd,  
The Pharisee, the idol he ador'd  
Denounced as loathsome in the sight of God.<sup>11</sup>

These were the churches who abandoned the true Gospel and preached according to the new methods, placing their faith in their institutions rather than in the power of God. The remnant church, on the other hand, was like the twelve apostles, of whom Christ said, "You twelve have I chosen—and you seem to prove/Yourselves confirmed in faith and holy love."<sup>12</sup>

Christ's purpose in coming to earth was to call out the elect into the visible remnant church. Primitive Baptists departed from their seventeenth and eighteenth century brethren in denying the existence of an invisible church made up of all the members of the elect in different churches and denominations. All those, they implied,

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<sup>11</sup> *The Harp of Zion*, 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

who were saved would be part of the remnant church in their time as they had been throughout history—specifically, the Primitive Baptists. This is implied in the words of the author of *The Harp of Zion*.

I am *ordain'd* of God, to *seek* and *save*  
 Those whom Jehovah loves and to me gave.  
 The *time*, the *place*, for me to meet with them,  
 By God's determin'd. tho' unknown to men.  
 Where'er their sojourn on this woe-word earth,  
*There shall* my word and spirit give them birth.

One thing that convinced the Primitive Baptists that they were the remnant church was their reading and understanding of their own history and the history of the church. These they read through the prophecies of Christ concerning the persecution that would come upon the elect throughout history.

Fierce and more furious they raise their passions high,  
 Till thousands of them impiously deny  
 That I or my Spirit ever used the word,  
*Chosen, elect, or righteous in the Lord.*  
 But when, by grace, we fearlessly declare,  
 That you are CHOSEN to be Christ's co-heir;  
 The world will cry,—Election! That from Satan came.  
 Their wrath will burn, you'll have the basest name.  
 The world's the same in every age to come;  
 Their souls, (as bodies), essentially are one!  
 As tigers, have been tigers, and will be;  
 As serpents have been and will be in subtlety.  
 This persecution, then, you must endure,  
 As those to follow, and those who have gone before.  
 Though thus my life and precept testifies,  
 Ten thousand *teachers* shall hereafter rise,  
 While *wisdom* shall presume the doctrine lies.  
 They'll learn to think that they can so impart  
 The Gospel's doctrine, that the human heart,  
 Shall see, shall own, shall love, and bless their name,  
 As stars of science, Israel's shining flame.  
 Myself, and prophets—and my apostles too,

Compared, with them, will seem a drop of dew  
 To the vast oceans—they will vaunting cry,  
 Behold the fruits of our bright charity!  
 In *love* we move--the world our powers own—  
 Jew, Gentile, Turk and Pagan, all are one!  
 With every Christian sect, --we please them all!  
 Before us mountains rise, retire or fall!  
 So men will dream delusions of themselves:  
 The varied victims of Satanic spells.  
 But all those things the world has done to me,  
 So will it treat my GRACE'S ministry.<sup>13</sup>

The elect, according to Primitive Baptist ecclesiology, had been gathered in the true churches which had existed in every era. In their age, the Primitive Baptists themselves were the elect. The false churches, which Osbourn termed “Edomites, Moabites, Ishmaelites, Hagarenes”—all enemies of Israel—“take crafty counsel against the true Israelites [the remnant church], and consult against the Lord’s hidden ones [the elect] in order to cut them off from being a nation, and the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.” “These people,” Osbourn said of the other denominations, “are confederated against the truth as it is in Jesus, and also against all the children of the great woman, and all those who love and contend for the truth.” The missionaries, other benevolent institutions and their supporters were involved together against the antission Baptists, Osbourn asserted, each group saying “Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us, for their cords and bands only embrace a few souls whom they call a remnant, or choice ones, or favorites, or the elect, &c.” “This, sir,” he concludes, “is the war and outrage now carried on

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 55.

against God and his holy mount, under a cloak of religion, by every denomination of professed christians under heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

Only by maintaining the order as laid out in Scripture and separating from the ‘false professors,’ the Primitive Baptists believed, could they maintain the purity of the remnant church. Some, such as James Osbourn, pointed to a hope that God would intervene to set things aright in his church. “It is but a little time that we have to suffer here, for with us, the noise of war will soon be over, and all clamor and strife be hushed in perpetual silence; at which time it will be known who are now right and who are wrong in matters of religion; and it we be found on the Lord’s side, as I believe we shall, it will be well for us; for it really is to be feared, that many who now stand high in a profession of religion, will not be found there.”<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, the Primitive Baptists, being the remnant, would “be suffered to undergo a temporary martyrdom.” The history of the remnant church had shown numerous times “that a glorious deliverance is preceded by long confinement, dark nights, desperate encounters, sharp conflicts, severe struggles, many fears, despairing thoughts, and gloomy prospects. But the sharper the contest, the more glorious the victory; and the longer the imprisonment, the more is the enlargement prized; and where the arrow of conviction makes the deepest furrows, there the seed of the gospel takes the strongest hold.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Osbourn, *Tidings of Joy*, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-127.



The remnant church stood against the corruption of the age, in Primitive Baptist ecclesiology, and protected the truth from those ministers who sought to undermine it. "A corrupt ministry is a curse to a nation because it stands connected with the souls of men, and is sure to beguile and mislead people. By it, god is dishonored, the gospel mangled, and divine truth perverted. . . . And yet this is the ministry so much admired among us, and which is doing such great execution in our land; for by it, many proselytes, are made, and great popularity gained, and a strange fire kindled upon the altar of Baal." "In this ministry," Osbourn continued, "little or no regard is had to gospel truth, to the operations of the Holy Ghost, to the honors of divine justice, to the atonement made by Christ, or to the purposes, decrees, counsels, and designs of the eternal God. And hence we may conclude that this ministry is what Paul calls, another gospel; and which gospel, is sure and certain to please carnal men, and to trouble the saints of God, and to subvert the gospel of Christ." Against this ministry stood "a seed left to serve the Lord, and it is counted to him for a generation; and to this generation pertain the gospel and Christ the substance of it, and withal, the covenant of grace with all its mercies, promises, and blessings; nor shall this generation be disinherited of these great and mighty things."<sup>17</sup>

Since the first century, human innovations had arisen which corrupted the divine ordering of the church. C.B. Hassell in his *Primitive Baptist history of the church up to the nineteenth century*, wrote "The period of the history of the church of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 132-134.

God from the creation to AD 100” was “incomparably the most important part of church history; because we have the infallible light of the Holy Scriptures to guide us during that period, pointing out, without any mistake, the path of the true servants of God, their labors and sufferings, their errors and chastisements, their repentance and salvation.” After AD 100, however, “humanly ascribed titles of spiritual father, confessor, doctor, rabbi, pope, cardinal, archdeacon, archbishop, reverend, etc., which are utterly out of place, and unscriptural, and worthless in the kingdom of God,” came into the church or arose in organizations establishing themselves as churches.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, God had preserved a remnant of his elect in churches which opposed the human system of religion, often to the point of martyrdom by the instituted church.

The argument of the apostolicity of the Baptist churches developed sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and entered into the Primitive Baptist discourse. While they held a doctrine of apostolicity, the Primitive Baptists differed from the later Landmark movement because they rejected the idea of a physical succession in time. This was in keeping with their doctrine of the pre-existence of the church. “According to the entire tenor of the New Testament Scriptures,” Hassell wrote, “What we are to look for is *not such outward succession, but a spiritual succession of principles, of inward,*

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<sup>18</sup> Hassell, 18.

vital, heartfelt religion.”<sup>19</sup> Hassell further argued that the apostolic churches had never gone out of existence, but instead

God has had on earth faithful, spiritual, unworldly, un-Romanized apostolic churches, each one of which, in its divinely established individuality and independence, has presented an insurmountable and indestructible breakwater against the countless tides of error, strife and corruption setting in from every quarter; and all of which have been united, by no mechanical, outward, worldly, usurping and oppressive bond of force, but by an inward, heavenly, spiritual, emancipating, purifying and elevating bond of Divine love and peace and fellowship, such as the Lord Jesus Christ, their Every Living, Unchangeable, and Omnipotent Head.<sup>20</sup>

Primitive Baptists found their spiritual ancestors among the “persecuted people of God” including the “Montanists, Tertullianists, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Petrobrusans, Henricians, Arnoldists, Waldenses, Albignses, United Brethren of Bohemia, and Lollards.” Each of these groups had been labeled as heretics for their opposition to the religious structures of their day. While many of these groups did differ on doctrine and held opinions at variance with Scripture and orthodox tradition, Primitive Baptists accepted them as their spiritual ancestors because such groups, they claimed, insisted “*upon the spirituality of the church of God and her heavenly obligation to walk in humble and loving obedience to al His holy commandments, both in an individual and a church capacity, and not in obedience to the unscriptural traditions and commandments of men.*”<sup>21</sup> The doctrines which marked the Primitive

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 291-292.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Baptists in their minds from the missionary Baptists, were “those held by the apostolic churches, as set forth in the New Testament, and those held, in the main, by the people of God in former times.”<sup>22</sup> The degree of doctrinal purity was determined by how subsequent groups measured up to the original churches in New Testament. “Should there exist now on earth a body of professed Christians who occupy the same ground in faith and practice as that of the church of the first century, they are RIGHT; and if any should be found occupying a different position, they are WRONG.”<sup>23</sup>

In linking themselves to a spiritual succession of pure churches descended from the first century apostles, the Primitive Baptists consciously placed themselves outside the Reformation tradition. Unlike the other Protestant denominations which proved such an inspiration to the missionary Baptists, Hassell and others argued, “Baptist churches have no succession from Rome.” The churches arising from the Protestant Reformation exhibited all the “inconsistency and defectiveness of the principles of the Protestant Reformers” which have “become more apparent and pronounced with the lapse of time, because seeds of error developed and grow and strengthen” which existed because of their decent from Rome.<sup>24</sup> The Primitive Baptists condemned the missionary Baptists for having “abandoned the true church of Christ, and made a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 331-332.

confederacy with the daughters of Babylon [the other Protestant denominations] and Papal Rome.” The missionary Baptist embrace of Armenianism and of missions revealed their kinship with Rome and showed a belief that “the Mother of Harlots herself has as good a doctrine to preach to the missions of her deluded followers as have a large number of the Missionary Baptists, so called, either of Europe or American.” Such a doctrinal affinity, in their view, was tragic especially in light of their belief that “They [Baptists] never belonged to Babylon—they did not come out of her.” Rather, “Baptists stood independent of all other religious organizations and acted the part nobly, until in England they succumbed to the principles and practices of Rome . . . under the leadership of Fuller and Carey, and in America that of Judson and Rice.”<sup>25</sup>

The scriptural model of the early church and those groups carrying on the tradition of martyrdom and persecution were important references for the Primitive Baptists, primarily because they saw such groups as one which preserved the true traditions and forms of the Apostolic church, no matter what their heretical views on specific doctrines. For the Primitive Baptists, the main mark of the ancient church emulated by them was their insistence on regenerate church membership, marked by baptism.

The apostolic churches were Baptist churches, because composed of baptized believers; and, even if no intervening links were discoverable,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 749-750

it would be absolutely certain that the churches of the Bible Baptists of the nineteenth century originated from, and are the only spiritual successors of, the apostolic churches. The learned Mesham said of the Baptists of this day that 'their origin was hidden in the remotest depths of antiquity' .....although they originated in the remote depths of antiquity, their origin was not hidden at all.<sup>26</sup>

He expands on this linkage in another place.

They disregarded infant or unregenerate baptism, and baptized all adults, whether previously baptized or not, who, upon a credible profession of faith, applied to them for membership in their churches, thus insisting upon a spiritual or regenerated church membership, the First and the most Important Mark of the Apostolic Church.

The Primitive Baptist's view of church history was closely related to their prophetic view. In sharply dividing the world of history from the world of scripture, the Primitive Baptists rejected the link missionary Baptists made between human progress and the advance of the gospel. While prophetic allusions and apocalyptic language appear in many Primitive Baptist writings, Joshua Lawrence is the only author I've found who penned an exposition of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation specifically related to these themes. Joshua Lawrence's interpretation of prophecy was designed to support the contention of the Primitive Baptists that they were the true church; that all of church history from the close of the apostolic age was a history of decline from the primitive idea with a small remnant church preserving

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 283.

apostolic Christianity; and the missionary Baptists, along with all other denominations, emerged from a 'spirit of Antichrist.'

Lawrence begins by asserting the presence in John's visions of the existence of the true church, represented by the white horse with a man who "wore a vesture dipped in blood and his name is called the Word of God"—that is, Jesus Christ. The soldiers who followed him were "his ministers of the gospel on pure gospel principles and not on money." Thus, Lawrence concludes, that John prophesied the spread of the gospel by his ministers according to his principles. Not only was the remnant church extant throughout history, but its existence was prophesied.

Also prophesied under the symbol of the "red horse," according to Lawrence, was that "persecution and blood would follow her [the Church] with the strength and swiftness of the war horse." Such persecutions of the true church came with the establishment of Christianity as the state religion by Constantine. After this, Lawrence says, John shows "the opening of the sixth seal, 'and lo, a great earthquake followed; the (gospel) sun became black as sackcloth of hair, the moon (the church) became blood, the stars of heaven (gospel ministers) fell to the earth, and the heavens departed as a scroll.'" At this point, "the whole frame of the gospel church was changed into quite a different form, from which Christ and his apostles first set it." The institutionalized church came, later splitting into Catholicism and Protestantism. They along with "Heathenism and Mahometanism" were prophesied as being the "four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth,

that the wind should not blow.”” The wind was the true gospel of Christ, held back in its advance by these four powers with “their false doctrines, worship, and various forms of false manner of worship and spurious doctrine.”<sup>27</sup>

John in Revelation, according to Lawrence, correctly prophesied the spread of the Gospel throughout the world, in the image of an angel flying east to west. The angel requested gospel ministers by whose hands God had spread the gospel from Christ’s time to Lawrence’s. “Three hundred years ago there was no preached gospel in America, which is west of Jerusalem where it began; and if the angel flew from the east, he of course flew westward. So that now the forest that once heard the howl of wolves, and the bellow of buffaloes, and the yell of Indians, echoes with a preached gospel from Canada to St. Augustine.” Here Lawrence takes the opportunity to point out gospel preachers did not travel due to missions, in his view, but because of persecutions which forced them from the Old World to the new. “This sent the angels (gospel ministers) into the western world to preach the gospel.” In keeping with the Primitive Baptist’s view of the remnant church, Lawrence held that “God’s means to spread the gospel is persecution, and this will be found to be true from Jerusalem through all countries until now.” In contrast, missions were “the devil’s means, and his agents have liked this means in all countries, because they, the devil’s priests, can roll in luxury and superfluity, and oppress the poor and live by their labor; and thus

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<sup>27</sup> Joshua Lawrence, “Froggery,” *The Primitive Baptist* 1:8 (April 28, 1836): 113-116.



charge them toll for going to heaven, which the king of kings has made free for all that choose to walk that way.”<sup>28</sup>

Lawrence moves into a long discourse about frogs in the natural order, discussing the major species of frogs, speculating on their symbolism in John’s writings. The bull frog is a referent to the Popes, “bellowing in the pope’s bulls over Europe, Asia and Africa.” The spring frog, so-called “because they can spring almost as far as a buck” and because of their tendency to hide in springs, mean “the clergy who can spring from place to place, or country to country, and hide their uncleanness in the spring of the gospel and therein catch bugs and muddy the gospel spring of life.” A rain frog, which lives in trees “and generally before rain makes a noise something like a man gritting his teeth” refers to “all hypocritical priests, who like the Jewish priests gnashed their teeth.” The Horned frog, Lawrence says, if this is the one John alludes to, “I think we cannot mistake the revelator’s meaning; that he meant all horned clergy, who armed with law power will persecute men even unto death” The final species of frogs, the toad frog, the one Lawrence is the most familiar with and the one which is by far the more numerous, are to him the ones which plagued Pharaoh. It is to the toad frog that Lawrence surmises John compares the three unclean spirits.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

Having exhaustively examined the nature of frogs, Lawrence considers the identity of the beast, the dragon, out of whose mouth the frog-like spirits were. The identity of the dragon was no mystery to Lawrence, as it would not have been to his contemporaries. "In a word," Lawrence wrote, "he means by the beast in the text the Roman Catholic religious empire, with all its errors, persecution, cruelty, civil and ecclesiastical power, and opposition against the Christian church." Lawrence makes much of the contrast between the harlot-figure and the bride-figure in describing the Church of Rome verses the gospel church. "The gospel church in this book represented as a bride, the Lambs wife—as the holy city of Jerusalem. But the Catholic church, or the church of anti-Christ, is represented by the...figure of a woman, under the figure of a whore, a harlot, &c., to show the wickedness and prostitution of the Catholic church to the kings of the earth—says she has committed fornication with them, &c."<sup>30</sup> "Then the beast," he concludes, "out of whose mouth this frog-like spirit came, means Christian Rome, or civil and ecclesiastical power joined together to support the church of Rome, or the Roman Catholic religion established by Constantine; which establishment became the engine of the devil to kill and persecute Christians unto death."<sup>31</sup>

A primary means that the Church of Rome persecuted the true church throughout history, according to Lawrence, was missions. It was in the Church that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

the missionary impulse began, and it is by the Catholic Church's impetus that the missionary impulse increased through the United States.<sup>32</sup> It was "by missions in foreign countries and barbarous nations," Lawrence wrote that "the Pope maintained in a great measure his power, influence, and wealth; all this is under the cloak of sending the gospel to the destitute and heathen." The link between the spread of Catholic power and the missionary enterprise was clear to Lawrence when one considered the history of Catholic missions. "By sending missionaries into distant nations to disgrace them, into the belief of the gospel, and by the same missionaries she has made the nations drunk with her errors and doctrine and practice spiritually speaking." "Missions," Lawrence concluded, "is the grand and hypocritical stratagems by which the Church of Rome has committed fornication with the kings of the earth, and made the nations drunk with the wine of her fornication, and she become the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth." Those Protestant denominations which supported missions, including Baptists, Lawrence termed "harlots... of which the Catholic church is the mother of many thousands; but like mother like daughter."<sup>33</sup> "This is one cause why I abominate missions," Lawrence wrote, "for missions is one of her abominations and filthiness of her fornication." "Among the Baptists," he asserted, "to my knowledge missions have been an abomination to thousands, and a curse to the society in division, discord, contention....evil speaking one brother of another, a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 212-213.

parting of ministering brethren and dividing churches and associations. This the missionaries know themselves has been the effect of missions among the Baptists throughout the States. This is true, and if true, then is not missions an abomination? Yes, Sir, and John rightly called it so.... Yes, Sir, they have been a curse to the Baptist society, a curse to the world, is my living testimony and I expect that it will be my dying testimony; for I have weighed the abomination of missions from the history of diverse countries and my own observation for 20 years, and I pronounce it a curse, a hypocritical scheme of priests to get money—for missions is founded on money, and money religion is the devil's religion and therefore an abomination and curse to the world; and a mission spirit is an unclean spirit from the mouth of this horned seven headed beast.”<sup>34</sup>

The effect of “the cursed spirit of moneyed missions” on Baptist churches, Lawrence wrote, was proof that the institutions “had its origin and sprung from the beast.” The questions of missions “divided and rent churches, Associations, and ministers apart.” Because of the controversies arising over these new organizations, Baptist churches were in “battle array against each other, members of the same church against each other, churches of the same Association against each other.” “These wars and fightings among the Baptists have sprung from missions,” Lawrence wrote, “and that man that denies this fact that missions and the moneyed schemes of the day is not the cause, I say in plain English tells a lie; for I have witnessed these facts for

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 213.

twenty years.”<sup>35</sup> The very fact that missions led to division and warfare among Baptists was enough to convince Lawrence and others that “the mission spirit is the spirit of the beast, the spirit of war, the spirit of division, discord, contention, lying deceit, guile, and a priest money making spirit—and I don’t hesitate to say, a devilish spirit.”<sup>36</sup> The devilish spirit came from the Beast, from the false Church of Rome. While Lawrence admitted many differences between the Church of Rome and missionary Churches, such were “only in the articles of trade, not in the trade not traders.” “What is the difference,” he asked, “between selling pardons and indulgences, &c. in the Roman church, and selling memberships, hiring agents, bible distributors, tract vendors, and all the whole devilish train of merchandising in the missionary church?”<sup>37</sup> There was none. “The Baptists,” Lawrence concluded, “have the whole of Rome and the Pope’s canons for their pattern, and not the scriptures nor Jesus nor his apostles.”<sup>38</sup>

The advocacy of missions by the majority of Baptists proved to the antissionists that they had forsaken the true Gospel way and were not longer part of the true visible church. Because of the apostasy of the missionary Baptists, Primitive Baptists could no longer live in fellowship with them. To support their separation and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 261.

schism, they created a mythic history in which they were cast as members of a persecuted, remnant church which was the visible manifestation of the church God elected for himself before the foundation of the world. In contrast to the optimistic postmillennialism of the missionary Baptists, the Primitive Baptists adopted an apocalyptic view of history which told, not of the ultimate victory of the church though its work on earth, but of the persecution of the true elect remnant church by the false institutions of man-made religion. This semi-dualistic view of church history emerges in a different form when we consider the surviving spiritual narratives of Primitive Baptists.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS

Sometime in 1812, Elder Joshua Lawrence recorded his religious experiences. The audience he intended it for is unknown, but perhaps he meant it as part of his witness to the congregations he preached to in the Kehukee Baptist Association. The manuscript remained unpublished until 1841 when "Victorious Grace" appeared in *The Primitive Baptist*. In this particular text, Lawrence not once mentions missions, benevolent societies, theological seminaries, or other such institutions. Yet a careful examination of this and other spiritual autobiographies show how the primitive Baptists constituted and understood their experiences in the light of changing understandings of the meaning and nature of religious conversion.

The differences between the Primitive Baptist's understanding of conversion and the new methods are seen by comparing the conversion narratives of the ministers of each group. Conversion narratives are particularly useful for charting the changes in understanding religious experience.<sup>1</sup> Spiritual autobiographies are essentially

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Shea has examined spiritual autobiographies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as forerunners of nineteenth century literature; see his *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Patricia Caldwell has examined Puritan conversion narratives for clues to the development of an "American mode of expression"; see *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

fictions, created out of actual events but presented to the reader after having gone through a process of interpretation called *folk hermeneutics*, a term coined by folklorist Jeff Scott Todd in his studies of Appalachian Christians. Todd argues that while most people in western society today think inductively, constituting their overall understanding of life and the world through observation of individual elements, members of Appalachian religious groups understood experience “deductively by analogy.”<sup>2</sup> Experiences become intelligible only by relating them to an overarching understanding of the world. A person’s religious experience or conversion is made sacred through “the teller’s interpretation of the events, based on shared, traditional beliefs and attitudes.”<sup>3</sup> The individual takes his experiences and presents them utilizing the framework the group’s cosmology provides, thereby making them intelligible to the reader, to himself, and to God.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, the conversion narratives of missionary Baptists share much of the same framework of the Primitive Baptists. They both speak in terms of awakenings, struggles with sin, and final assurance of salvation. The autobiographies of missionary Baptists, however, differ in their essential details from those of the Primitive Baptists. Unlike the latter narratives, the missionary narratives are linear,

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Todd Tilton, *Powerhouse for God* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 195.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.



containing fewer overt biblical references and possessing a non-biblical literary structure.

Jacob Bower, a prominent frontier missionary and enthusiastic Baptist advocate of the new measures, left a valuable narrative of his conversion with helps to illustrate the differences between the Primitive and missionary Baptist's narratives of their experience. Bower was born in Pennsylvania in 1786. His early religious education, he recalled, consisted of "Be good children; all good children when they die wilt go to a good place, where Jesus is." After his mother died when he was six years old, Bower recalled that he developed a great concern about the future state of his soul. "I was yet unconscious of sin in myself, and my anxiety to die and go to the good place where Mother was, greatly increased." When he was seven, however, he recalled awakening to a knowledge of his sinfulness under the careful teaching of his father. "I lived a farasee (Pharisee), trusting in my good name, and innocence, till I was in my nineteenth year." Eventually he came under the influence of the doctrine of universalism, which continued for five years.<sup>5</sup>

In 1811, Jacob and his wife visited his father in Shelby County, Kentucky. The visit had a great influence on him. On leaving his father said to him, "I want you to promise me . . . that you will serve God & keep out of bad company." Bower agreed, said farewell and set off. Later, he began to ponder the advise his father gave.

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<sup>5</sup> "Autobiography of Jacob Bower," in William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830, A Collection of Source Material* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1931), 186-188.

“Although he had given me the same council, and in the same words, perhaps a hundred times before, yet it never produced such an impression on my mind as now.”<sup>6</sup>

Later they stayed with a Baptist friend of his father, with whom he discussed his spiritual state.

Some time later Bower’s mind was further exercised over the question of his salvation through his attendance at an execution.

I started on with this thought, how does that man feel, knowing that he was to die today. Suddenly, as if some one had asked me, And how do you feel? . . . All of a sudden, (ah, I shall never forget it) as if a bank had been opened for me, the inside of which I had never seen: I got a sight of the wretchedness of my heart—a cage of every unclean and hateful thing. . . . My mind & heart have always been enmity against God, who is so holy than he cannot allow of no sin, however small it may appear in the sight of men. How can I ever be admitted into Heaven with such a heart? It is utterly impossible. Lost, lost, forever lost. . . . I could see no way of escaping eternal judgment.<sup>7</sup>

This state of despair persisted in Bower’s mind for two months.

The next event that Bower records as leaving a deep impression on his soul was an earthquake in 1811, which set off a revival of sorts in his community. Residents went from house to house, from meeting to meeting, praying, exhorting one another, and listening to sermons. “Now it appeared to me,” he recalled, “that surely no one was as great a sinner as I, none had such a wicked heart, and such vile thoughts.” He was convinced that he had been abandoned by God and had no hope of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 190.

receiving his grace. "I became resolved," he decided, "to press forward. I would pray to serve God though he send me to hell, yet I will lay at his feet and beg for mercy as long as I am out of hell." But it was not easy, for he later recalled praying but finding no relief for his troubled conscience.

He was finally converted two months after the earthquake, after spending most of the day and night in prayer, believing all along that "Before the sun rises again I shall be dead and in hell."

Suddenly my thoughts turned to the sufferings of Christ, and what he endured on the cross. That he suffered in soul and body, his soul was exceedingly sorrowful even cast doubts, sweating as it had been great drops of blood falling to the ground; and all his powerful sufferings for the space of three hours on the cross, and that not for himself; it was for sinners that he thus suffered that they might be saved. The next thought that passed through my mind was, If it was done for sinners, it was done for me. I believed it. The storm called off, my troubled soul was easy.<sup>8</sup>

Bower's conversion, according to his narrative, was relatively quick and painless. The entire period encompassed by his spiritual struggles was only the space of four months. During this time he seems to have been concerned over the state of his salvation, but not to the point of despairing over his soul for days, weeks or months. The entire question of salvation is approached by Bower with a calm rationalism. He faces, not whether he is of the elect or not, but on what basis he is to choose for salvation. The narrative centers on Bower's thoughts and struggles, on what his experience is, not on God's dealings with his soul. Unlike earlier narratives

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

which would have placed the divine's dealings with the soul of man at the center, Bower's is typical of a new generation conversion stories which deals with the process by which an individual came to a decision for salvation. As the new methods of revivalism were designed to excite both mind and heart to realize the necessity for making a conscious decision to trust Christ for salvation, so Bower's new narrative provided the interested reader with a procedure to follow in moving toward salvation.

In a similar way, the narrative of the Virginian missionary Baptist Jeremiah Jeter shows the effect the new measures' understanding of conversion had on their structure. Jeter records his first intense concern about his spiritual state occurring in 1821, at the time of a revival in his community. He recalled attending a service at a Baptist church near his home. On surveying the scene, he burst into tears. "My mortification at this unexpected and . . . unseemly demonstration of feeling was intense," occurring suddenly and in public. He had never considered his spiritual state before this time, nor had he been brought up with an intense regard for religious matters. After this incident, he spent much time in Scripture, meditation and prayer. Not long afterwards he attended the burial of a young friend, a man who, Jeter wrote "was of respectable convictions, but had become intemperate." Upon looking at the body of his dead friend "the horrible appearance of his gaunt face made a deep impression on my nervous system, that had been weakened by anxiety and sleeplessness" brought about by his concerns over his spiritual condition. He entered a period of depression, during which "my religious convictions and my nervous disorder were inseparable." Jeter concluded that the only resolution to his psychological

problems was to end all religious convictions, which he did. He found himself for a time restored to his former physical and emotional health.<sup>9</sup>

Within a few months, however, Jeter attended a revival meeting which left a great impression on him. "My purpose to become a Christian was now fixed," he wrote. "It was not merely my purpose to enter into the kingdom of heaven, but to outstrip all my associates in the celestial race." With this determination he gave up his sins and worldly pleasures, spent much time in prayer, and attended revival meetings and prayer meetings. He struggled with the question of his salvation for several weeks, hoping at that each revival he attended that he would be converted but leaving only with a deeper sense of sinfulness and the need for Christ. Upon hearing of the conversion of a young friend who had been awakened to her sinful state after he had been, he came to the conclusion that somehow "I had missed the road to heaven."<sup>10</sup> Finally, after about six months of struggle, Jeter prayed at a revival meeting and trusted in Christ. Instantly, he recalled, all his doubts and fears vanished. "My heart was overflowing with gratitude and joy," Jeter would write later, "and longed to give utterance to its emotions."<sup>11</sup>

Both Jeter's and Bower's narratives reveal how the new methods shaped the experience of conversion. There is an almost total absence of the supernatural in these

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<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah Jeter, *The Recollections of a Long Life* (Richmond, VA: Religious Herald Co, 1891), 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-56.

narratives. Rather than being at the center of an intense struggle in the spiritual realm between God and Satan for his soul, man is seen as struggling internally with questions about when to become converted. Conversion is something desired and actively sought after by both these men, as evidenced by Jeter's proclamation that "my purpose to become a Christian was now fixed." There is no sense in these narratives that there is a divine transaction going on, that Jeter and Bower are fulfilling a plan set in motion by God in eternity past. The focus is not on God's dealings with man, but rather the other way around. Internal struggles are seen as having psychological elements, caused by physical weaknesses, and not as the result of a spiritual battle going on over the possession of a man's soul. In keeping with the new evangelicalism's idea that man is a free moral agent who can rationally choose to become converted, once properly persuaded by the right use of the constituted means, Jeter and Bower portray themselves in their conversion narratives as possessing the ultimate control over their own spiritual destinies. Once they've decided that they want to become converted, then they wait patiently for God to confirm their decision. In Bower's case it was a matter of a few weeks; in Jeter's, it took six months. But neither the process of coming to the point of realizing the need for conversion nor the waiting for it to become reality are portrayed as particularly difficult.

The conversion narratives of the Primitive Baptists are very different from those of Bower and Jeter. They record intense internal struggles, lasting sometimes for years, during which the individual is brought from one high point to a low point. The person is portrayed as being at the center of a cosmic struggle for his soul, with

God fighting for the realization of an election made by Him in eternity past. All that the narratives reveal, the Primitive Baptists believed, was the working out in time of a predetermined plan. For this reason, the experiences of salvation they record have a much more inspired quality than the ones of Bower and Jeter. Because they are the outworking of a divine plan, the events of an individual's life leading up to the moment of conversion are seen as participating in a sacred script authored by God before time began. The individual is subsumed under the divine, which is a reversal of what occurred in Jeter and Bower's narratives. As sacred script, the narratives utilize a spiral form of cyclical repetition of themes and symbols in such a way as to link past and future events of an individual's life with the divine plan which is unfolding. These narratives often contain two or three spirals, each building towards the moment of conversion.

Each of these narrative spirals has common elements. First, there is an early concern for their spiritual state. Usually associated with either a supernatural vision, a prophetic utterance, or some other theophany. This concern is followed by a period of outwardly holy living, usually marked by prayer, reading of Scripture, and a rejection of sinful pastimes and associations. After a while, some crisis presents itself which plunges the individual into a time of almost suicidal depression and despair over the state of their soul, during which the individual is often plagued by thoughts of death and the coming judgment. This period is often simultaneous with a period of sinful living, but sometimes the later occurs before the former. After these struggles, the

convert enters into another period of peace ushered in by another intervention of the divine. Eventually, the spirals culminate in a specific conversion event.

Joshua Lawrence's narrative exhibits this spiral structure and reveals the primary symbols and motifs used by the Primitive Baptists in presenting their religious experiences. He records that when he was ten years old God began to convict him for his sins through dreams of "lightning and fire consuming the world."<sup>12</sup> He continued to feel himself under the conviction of God, and by age eleven and twelve he "began to have serious thoughts about religion and judgment to come, with terror of mind." This religious precociousness reappears in other Primitive Baptist memoirs. Concern over spiritual matters arises earlier among these ministers than it did in the lives of Jeter and Bower, who do not record spiritual concerns arising until about their middle teen years or, in the case of Bower, his early twenties.

As his mind became occupied with spiritual concerns, Lawrence began frequent and fervent reading of scripture, especially the description of the death of Christ. Yet such was his lack of knowledge of the Way of Christ that at that time he had no "idea of his being a Savior for sinners, but thought he was so good a man," by age fifteen, so sharp were the convictions of his mind that young Lawrence resolved to "break off my practical sins and turn to God." by his own efforts he began to try to pull himself out of his sinful state, though reading scripture, prayer and fasting. All these did have some effect. "After the days of prayer & mourning was over, I felt my

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua Lawrence, "Victorious Grace," *The Primitive Baptists*, (October 9, 1841): 298.



conscience quiet and it did not accuse me so powerfully, nor I did not feel quite the same horror of mind nor fear of the wrath of God.”<sup>13</sup>

His relief of mind lasted momentarily, however, because Lawrence felt that God was not the only being in the universe contesting for his soul. Unlike the narratives by Bower and Jeter, the supernatural is a real presence in Primitive Baptist conversion stories. The elect individual’s soul is shown as a battlefield between God and Satan. Lawrence had this definite impression.

So fast had the devil possession of my heart that he soon shamed me out of all my fastings, prayers and repenting for sin; and in a few days I forgot all & returned to my fleshly desires again with sinful practices. And it did see sweeter than ever, though when it was committed it left its sting in my bosom; when was all my grief, that I could not sin but I must feel the gripes of a guilty conscience.<sup>14</sup>

All this culminated at age sixteen when his father died, leaving him an estate and establishing him as an independent man of some means, though just how much Lawrence never indicated. He describes the three year death after his father’s death as one when he was “determined to fill myself with dancing, frolicking, gambling, quarreling, and all manner of vice and blasphemy, that I was capable to commit.” He said that he rarely felt the pains of conviction for his sins. Only those times when he wound himself at Christian meetings. As he heard the minister “tell me of my crimes and what would become of me,” Lawrence would resolve never to commit such sins again. As soon as he left the meetings, however, “and got with my old companions, I

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 299.

was so shamed, and hated they should think that I had any notion of religion, that I tried to throw away all the thoughts, thereof out of my mind.”<sup>15</sup>

After this three year period of sinful living, this first spiral ends and a second is initiated as Lawrence entered in his twentieth year what he describes as “my travel of sorrow.” This second spiral shares similarities with this first. The narrative employs similar motifs of internal struggle against sin, misery about one’s state, a sense of God’s supernatural involvement in his life. The difference lays not in the structure but the intensity with which the motifs are presented to the reader. The conscience is pricked not by a generalized sense of sin but by Scripture.

During the previous three year period, Lawrence records that he would read the Scriptures. One passage had a tremendous effect on him. From the Book of Job, his mind fixed on the verse where Job, having been afflicted with the torments of Satan, is told by his wife ““Curse God and die.”(Job 2:9) After this, Lawrence writes, “it appeared that I must curse him, and die, in spite of all my power.” This verse, he said, “Brought all my former sins into view, and charged me with the whole.”<sup>16</sup>

After this time, Lawrence’s mind was continually occupied with the thought “curse God, and die.” He would struggle against this sense, repeating over and over “bless, God, bless God, in order to keep the other words from coming out of my mouth; but it would still be in my mind for every hour in the day, curse God and die.”

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Yet for all his misery, Lawrence was not willing to leave his sins. He said to himself, "I am now a young man, and to turn religious and forsake my old companion and my sinful practices, they will laugh me to scorn; and I want to get married, and surely religion will spoil all that." For these reasons, he kept up his previous activities, notwithstanding the continuing struggle in his mind with the thought "curse God, and die."<sup>17</sup> When Lawrence did take time to pray and "to reflect on my conduct and how I had sinned against God and my own conscience," he "would fall into making vows and resolutions I would do so no more; and promise the Lord that if he would forgive me, I would never do the like any more."<sup>18</sup> The promises would last only momentarily. So overburdened was he by the guilt his activities caused him that Lawrence says, "One day as I was ploughing being so overpowered with distress and could find no peace to my troubled soul, and strewing the rows with tears from end to end, with a heart ready to burst under a sense of guilt and distress, I was constrained to come to my knees."<sup>19</sup> This condition of mind and soul continued, by his own account, for almost eighteen months. All his prayers seemed to him to no avail; as soon as he promised never to sin again, he would fall back into his old habits. Yet gradually, Lawrence records, "it seemed that I had more power given me to withstand sin." He gave up his former companions, took a hammer to his fiddle, and gave up gambling and dancing. "I felt

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 299-300.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 301

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the weight of guilt that flowed from them; and saw that they would lead me down to hell, to torment forever, and I felt more resigned to serve the Lord than what I had done.”<sup>20</sup>

As he gave up his sinful activities, Lawrence began to engage in religious and devout practices as a way of working out his own salvation and gaining the Lord’s forgiveness for his past disobedience. Looking back on this time, Lawrence identifies the key problem he faced: “What a sad mistake I was in; for I did not believe with a saving faith, nor with that faith that delivers from the guilt of sin, by the application of blood.”<sup>21</sup> This period of religious dutifulness before God continued for six months. Gradually, Lawrence began to sense that the way he was on was not the way to heaven. “At length,” he says, “god brought me to see I was a sinner by nature, a sinner in heart as well as life.” All his focus on external actions had not removed the inner taint of sin from his heart, or as he put it, he had tried “to wash the outside of the cup while the inside was full of filth, which had been hitherto hid from my eyes. But here inside, at one view I saw enough sin to damn me to all eternity, provided I had never committed and actual sin.”<sup>22</sup>

The growing revelation of his inner depravity shook Lawrence to his very core. He despaired of ever being converted. At this point in his narrative, Lawrence

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

introduces a recurring motif in Primitive Baptist spiritual narratives—the supernatural penetration by God of the natural world. The texts abound in natural imagery, with a mixture of wilderness, fear, damnation, judgment, thunder and clouds. The world is a source of fear, filled with portents of judgment and damnation, and Lawrence is at its mercy. At this point in the second spiral, the peace that he had struggled through prayer and works to obtain was stripped from him; all at once he saw himself at the mercy of an omnipotent God in control of the forces of nature. “I was afraid to go in the woods,” he wrote, “for fear a snake would bite me, and then, oh, then to hell I must go immediately.” He would hear a thunderstorm and immediately, he recalled, “I would lie down and shut my eyes so I could not see the lightning, and stop my ears so I could not hear the sound thereof.” In such situations, Lawrence recalled “that thought, curse God and die, would be constant in my mind, while every thunderbolt, I thought, would tear me in pieces, to think while he was displaying his power I was ready to curse him, Oh, how I did tremble under a sense of guilt and the fear of hell, and his great power to send me there; while every breath was, Lord, spare me, spare me, don’t send me to hell now, let me live a little longer, have mercy on me, I will try to do better.”<sup>23</sup> In this state Lawrence wandered, by his own reckoning, for three years.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 303.

Lawrence, looking back, could sense that God had not abandoned him. This confidence came in the form of a vision—not a dream, Lawrence was quick to attest to, but an image which came to him while awake.

On a certain day, being in the field all alone, meditating on my condition, and thinking how I should bear the pains of hell, and live in fire that none could quench, it appeared in a moment and unexpected that I saw the Lord Jesus Christ, about thirty feet from the earth in the air, as plain as if it had been with my natural eyes.

The impact of this vision was dramatic and immediate. For Lawrence, this was a divine revelation of real knowledge of the gospel.

Never until this moment had I any knowledge of Jesus Christ, no more in comparison than a horse; though I thought I believed in him, as I told you. But now I was an believed he was the Savior of sinners, and I felt my heart inclined to ask him to save me which I had never asked him before, for I did not know there was such a person, and therefore I had always prayed to God, and depended on my own works.

Yet this vision did not lead Lawrence to an immediate conversion. There was still another revelation that Lawrence experienced in the vision.

But within five minutes after this view, God revealed to me my case, and state I was in by nature; for it appeared I saw hell opened to the eyes of my mind, in twenty steps of the place where I stood in the similitude of a large pit and pillars of flooding fire and smoke descending out of it; while my conscience cried, that is your just reward, and there you must dwell forever with the damned spirits. . . . While it appeared that the heavens were dark with vengeance, and an angry God to torment me forever and ever; and the justice like a drawn sword to slay me and cast me in that burning smoking pit to drink liquid sulfurous flames forever.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 305-306

This vision, at the same time hopeful and horrifying, precipitated a deep crisis in Lawrence. As a result of his vision of hell and damnation he began praying earnestly to Christ for salvation. This occupied him from the middle of the afternoon to sunset. "wandering from grove to grove and stump and field, pouring my soul out like water before the Lord."<sup>25</sup> So great was his distress, that he "went home, laid down, and gave up to die and go to hell; while my family came found me, and thought I was beside myself; but die I thought I should, and every breath seemed it would be the last, with hell in full view and an angry God to torment, to torment me forever."<sup>26</sup>

Yet Lawrence did not die, for he awoke the next day and "did not feel so much distressed as I had done before, for I was dead to myself, and began to have thoughts about Christ and his righteousness." In this state, he spent the hours between ten and twelve o'clock walking through the fields, and the resolution came to his mind to "go to Jesus Christ, poor and naked just as I am; and pray him to clothe me with that righteousness which I believe he has." Having reached this point, Lawrence:

Going about fifty yards to the corner or the fence, I tried to pray to Christ for his righteousness, and the pardon of my sins; and while on my knees I felt a change pass through my heart, with these words of Scripture; (Freely you have received, freely give.) I instantly had faith to believe in Christ, and his righteousness of mind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

After this conversion, Lawrence felt renewed, happy and joyful. "My burden," he says, "fell off my back, my guilt was gone on that minute, the sight and fear of hell was gone, and the sense of an angry God."<sup>28</sup>

Lawrence's conversion had much different consequences than Jeter's or Bower. Rather than providing a peaceful assurance of salvation, his conversion begins a lifelong struggle, with his soul a continual battleground between God and the Devil. He underwent continual cycles of assurance and despair for an undetermined period of time in what Ann Hawkins terms psychomachia, an "intrapsychic conflict" between two different selves, projected by the writer externally as warfare between God and Satan for the possession of his soul.<sup>29</sup> Psychomachia consists of a lifelong struggle punctuated by periods of deep crisis and momentary victory. To a nineteenth century Primitive Baptist, this struggle was the only way a person had any assurance of salvation, because it marked the continual process of sanctification.

The experience of struggle lead Lawrence to realize in himself the existence of "two selves," one of spirit and the other of flesh. He was still tormented in his heart, he recalled, when one day his reading of Scripture revealed to him that "it was God's will they should remain with me until the day of my death, that my flesh had not been changed in my soul. . . . So I saw there must be war here between soul and flesh as

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ann Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Autobiography of Augustine, Bunyan and Merton* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Universtiy Press, 1985), 13.



long as I live.”<sup>30</sup> The constant warfare between the flesh and the spirit in this view helped to strengthen the faith of the Christian. Temptations, according to Lawrence, lead him to greater insight into the scriptures; they teach him the weakness and sinfulness of the flesh; and finally they force him to realize “the all sufficiency of Jesus Christ and his power to save me.”<sup>31</sup> With these powers’ fighting for possession of himself, Lawrence asks “how can I expect peace, when there is such a contrariety of passions and spirits in men, earring one against the other so that the flesh can’t do what it wills, nor the soul can’t do what that wills, because they oppose and lust one against the other.”<sup>32</sup>

Spirit and Flesh have characteristics which manifest themselves from time to time in the life of the Christian. Lawrence calls these “the principles of the flesh against the principles of the soul.” He then lists ninety principles of bad and good, thesis and antithesis, which arise out of their roots in Christ and Satan. “How then,” Lawrence asks, “can the Christian man hope to be in peace, when there is such a contrariety of principles of flesh and spirit? It cannot be.”<sup>33</sup>

Lawrence applies the division of the world by the Primitive Baptists into the sacred and the profane that they applied to their opposition to missions and the new

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, “Victorious Grace,” 321-322.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

measures evangelism to the conversion experience. Jeter and Bower did not acknowledge the existence of such a division. But these men's conversion narratives acknowledge the role that revivals and human intervention played in their spiritual experience. Aside from scripture reading and prayer, Lawrence does not refer to any instrumental means of his conversion. Indeed, it is only when God reveals himself directly to Lawrence in an unmediated way does he come to a knowledge of how he might be saved. His conversion takes place in an allegorical landscape filled with symbolic meaning. These features of Lawrence's memoirs are continued in James Osbourn's narrative, *The Lawful Captive Delivered*.

James Osbourn was born in Surrey, England in October of 1780, the last of fourteen children. Osbourn was raised in a High Church environment which, in the England of the time, had fallen into a period of decline. Characterizing the pastors and parishioners of his count, Osbourn says he had every reason to believe that they "were in palpable darkness to spiritual and eternal things" and they had no more "experiential knowledge" of Christ "as if they had been pagans or Turks." It was in this environment that he was raised, and Osbourn (echoing Lawrence) says, I grew up in love with the works of Satan and with the vain and sinful maxims of carnal men, and was left to follow the course of this world, and to be taken captive by the devil at his will."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James Osbourn, *The Lawful Captive Delivered; or, the prey taken from the mighty. In which are set forth the gracious dealings of the Lord with the author, in reference to the salvation of his soul*. (Baltimore: John d. Toy, 1835), 18-19.

As Lawrence did in his narrative, Osbourn begins the account of his spiritual life at an early age. He recorded frequent bouts of depression and spiritual despair, some so violent that he took them to be actual images of death and judgment.<sup>35</sup> Osbourn says of this period of his life that he “was in a wilderness dark and dreary . . . but all the land was empty, void and waste.” Like Lawrence, Osbourn uses natural imagery to represent the profane state of his life, presenting the conditions of his soul as an allegorical landscape devoid of any markers to guide Osbourn on his spiritual journey. But looking back on this period before his salvation, Osbourn understood that the hand of God still operated on him. “I vexed his Holy Spirit, and yet he cut me not off. I rebelled against him, but still he forsook me not.”<sup>36</sup> Evidence of this came when he was seventeen years old. As in Lawrence’s narrative, Osbourn became awakened to his sinful state through the preaching of a Surrey minister, one Mr. Flockmorton. After this, Osbourn followed Lawrence’s pattern of undertaking “pharisaical exercises,” unspecified acts of piety such as praying and fasting. These actions produced periods of “confidence and despair, alternating exuberance with apathy.”<sup>37</sup> At no time during this period, Osbourn says, did he have true peace for his soul. Those times when he did experience a measure of peace the older Osbourn dismisses as “but a mere show, for it grew out of my own performances” rather than

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 35-51

coming about through the workings of sovereign grace. During this portion of his life, Osbourn described himself as “the Lawful Captive,” held in bondage to sin by regulations and the idea that only through man’s own efforts could they be saved.<sup>38</sup>

At this time Osbourn described himself as “a sinner by nature and a rebel by practice—to evil prone and pleased with the service of Satan.”<sup>39</sup> Once convicted of his sinful state, however, Osbourn attempted to achieve salvation through his own efforts. “For this peace of folly,” he writes, “I suffered severely. And I would truly say, that most wretched are the effects of the self-righteous spirit, for it robs God and powers detrimental to a newly awakened soul.”<sup>40</sup> It is God’s majesty that is threatened, Osbourn states, by any attempt to displace the role of divine grace in salvation. The attribute of majesty, above all other, forces the sinner to realize the state of his soul.<sup>41</sup>

This state of spiritual turmoil continued for almost a year. He did not receive any response from the Lord to his cries, prayers, and actions during this time, save that of continuing suffering and torment. Looking back on this, Osbourn could see this period as being under the sovereign control of God. He was following a plan decided by God before the foundation of the world, suffering trials which were central to his

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 67

salvation. "The Lord seemed bent on trying me in the furnace, and thus cause me to pass under the rail before and should overcome the comforting of the gospel to any government extent."<sup>42</sup>

At one point, Osbourn recounts that he attempted suicide. His attempt was foiled, he insists, by divine intervention.<sup>43</sup> This event gave him a momentary rest, for it provided him with evidence that God had not abandoned him. Soon, however, the fears over the state of his soul returned. He had a sense of being "a cast off, and a captive running to and fro." He had continued in an allegorical wilderness for all this time. Now, his spiritual turmoil moved him into actual wilderness space. Seeking peace and solace he left his house and regularly went "into the most lonesome of fields." In solitude he "meditated on the awful state my soul was in, and also entreated the Lord to have mercy on me." Finding no relief, he would leave these fields "with a mind sadly blackened and cast down."<sup>44</sup>

One reason for his continued spiritual distress, Osbourn said, was the lack of preaching on the doctrines of grace. Such preaching, he claimed, would have given him some assurance of his salvation. He was surrounded, he recalled, "with such as suited a boasting Pharisee." Preaching which emphasized moral behavior or salvation by one's own efforts "tended to starve and not feed my soul." The realization of how

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 73.

far from heaven he was, try as he might by his own efforts did, however, “irritate my wounded conscience, instead of healing it.”<sup>45</sup> Preachers of such doctrine had little relation to the state of Osbourn’s soul, he said, because such men lacked “experiential” knowledge of the gospel which arose from them having undergone regeneration and conversion at the hands of a sovereign God. Nothing such ministers said, unilluminated as they were by the Holy Spirit, could give them the spiritual comfort they needed. “Preachers,” Osbourn wrote, “if they were not incurably taught by the spirit of the Lord of Glory, they must necessarily be ignorant of the *mystery of God in a pure conscience*.” To such preachers men and women enduring real spiritual struggles and torments were “a perfect puzzle to them.”<sup>46</sup>

During this period of his life, Osbourn met a minister who understood the spiritual struggles he had been enduring for so long. Under the preaching of John Horn, pastor of the Independent Church in Horsham, Osbourn grew in his knowledge of God. “His preaching,” he wrote, “had a very different would with it to men than what I was then in the habit of hearing; but what it all could mean I knew not, but it left a very pleasant sensation on my mind.”<sup>47</sup> Still, even with Horn’s sermons, Osbourn’s mind continued to be troubled. In addition, his physical health became affected due to the stresses endured by his spiritual troubles. He suffered bodily “with

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

much cold and hunger,” a mirror of the deadness of his soul and desire for what he saw as real spiritual food. His health was like his spirit, low; he had been badly clothed by the preaching of unknowledgable ministers. Like his spiritual sufferings, however, Osbourn later saw how his physical troubles were part of the divine ordering of things. It “added to grief within, made my life a burden to men; and I think of it now with feelings that I cannot describe, for I was an object of pity in more senses than one; and having before me an inhospitable world, and in my soul a sense of divine wrath, I could but be dejected and much oppressed.” He feared that “my year of Jubilee would never come.”<sup>48</sup> The torments against his physical body were the outward manifestations of God’s punishment against his soul, keeping both enchained. Osbourn explained this physical and spiritual suffering is explained by him as an ongoing battle between good and evil in the soul. “Satan,” he wrote, “seemed bent on keeping my mind in a continual uproar and breeding all the disturbances there that he was capable of.”<sup>49</sup>

Osbourn soon underwent a three month period of severe turmoil he termed “a school of instruction.” The afflictions of his soul led him to doubt the reality of God and the truth of the Bible. Satan, he claimed, tried to persuade him that the promises of damnation and deliverance contained in Scripture were false, and therefore nothing to be concerned about. Yet in spite of this his spiritual condition testified to him the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 79.

truth of God and Scripture. "If everything else was a fiction," he wrote, "my misery was a reality."<sup>50</sup>

The main theme in Osbourn's narrative is God's sovereignty in salvation, a doctrine he continually refers to. As with other Primitive Baptist authors, and against the teachings and practices of the advocates of the new methods, Osbourn held that God was absolutely sovereign in salvation through divine election. To attempt to force God's hand, as the Armenians and the new revivalists were doing by claiming that man had a say in his salvation, was to violate the order preordained by God and revealed in the Scriptures. "Men may hate and despair" of this doctrine. They may "fight against the fixed purposes and decrees of God." But in spite of the claims of the advocates of the new methods and the supporters of missions and the other new institutions, "they cannot alter them....nor can they be changed by power or praise."<sup>51</sup> The process of salvation could not be short circuited by any method devised by man. From this perspective, Osbourn's state as was Lawrence's' was preordained. He could only wait patiently for his conversion.

His conversion eventually did come. While still residing outside London, he went to hear Horn preaching one Sunday. "How I should hear, and what I should hear, and the effect that the preaching would produce on my worn down soul, were things that concerned me much as I moved along." The preaching, though not

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 101.



mentioned as to content, apparently stirred his soul and he began to sense the illumination of god's grace. Romans 10:4 came to him. Of this verse he said "this was a healing word to my soul, for it came with power and great glory, as well as sweetness." At this point, with great suddenness, the grace of God flooded his soul. "Before it my darkness fled....and my fetters burst, and my load of guilt dropped from my conscience, and my hardened heart gave way, and Moses was silenced, and Satan delivered from his seat, and the Lawful Captive delivered."<sup>52</sup>

Osborn would later describe his conversion as the central event of his life. Not only did he achieve the peace his soul had longed for, but the experience taught him the folly of relying on any man or man-made activity as a way to salvation. His conversion, while occurring after hearing a sermon which stirred his heart, was in Osborn's view accomplished solely by the action of the Holy Spirit on his heart. Neither he nor any other man had done anything to bring it about. His was not just a change of mind, as Finney described conversion; it was a complete regeneration of his heart and soul by the power of divine grace. For this reason, Osborn said, he became convinced "that I was to choose no man in the ministry as my father in the Gospel." The soul relationship was between Osborn and god, who had chosen him in Christ before time began. "I was cast upon the Lord from the womb, and in him do I now trust."<sup>53</sup> Once the relationship between God and the elect was established, the latter's

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 105-106

walk was guided by the indwelling of the Holy spirit, which illuminated the mind of the convert and gave him all knowledge of divine things. Thus illuminated, Osbourn wrote, "I now saw so much beauty and worth in Christ and the gospel as no man can see, or feel, or know anything of, but by the spirit of the living God."<sup>54</sup>

Osbourn's narrative continues with his life, journeying to America and becoming a Baptist minister. But the conversion experience he recounts is central to his life. He continually refers to it throughout the remainder of the narrative. In this respect, Osbourn's experiences paralleled that of another Primitive Baptist minister, Wilson Thompson.

Wilson Thompson was born August 17, 1788 in Woodfork County, Kentucky. His mother went through a difficult delivery and as he records "it was thought that both mother and child must immediately die." They called in the minister of the local church, Elder John Lee, to pray for both. During Lee's prayer, Thompson recorded, the Elder "received such full assurance, that, rising from his knees, he boldly said to all present, that the child would be a man for God, to preach the Gospel of His Grace."<sup>55</sup> Later, Thompson reported another strange event that his parents related to him which he interpreted as the first evidence that Lee's prediction came from God. His father, so the story went, could not remember a particular Scripture text he was looking for. After searching his bible, Thompson's father gave up. Young Wilson, according to the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>55</sup> Thompson, 8-9.

narrative, took the book and opened it, turning the leaves as it lay on his legs, and having placed my finger on a certain part, he looked at the place and saw the long-sought text.”<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to Lawrence and Osbourn, Thompson grew up in a household where religious topics were frequently discussed. Such discussions of spiritual matters made an early impact on Thompson. “The abundance of religious conversation,” Thompson remembered, “early impressed my young mind with the awful realities of a future state, the miseries of the wicked, and kindred subject.” He developed a fear as to the future of his soul. As a result Thompson resolved to reform his life, “get religion, and thus clear of future miseries” by his own power. Why he would take such a route to salvation is a particular mystery in his narrative. Thompson was exposed to the teaching of the Regular Baptist, who emphasized salvation by grace alone and the sovereignty of God in election. “While I felt very partial to the Baptists,” Thompson says, “I had never learned one idea of their system of grace, but was basing all my hope upon the good works which I intended to perform.”<sup>57</sup> In all, a very unlikely statement. Yet this appears as a convention in Primitive Baptist narratives: the person undertakes to save himself, only to discover the futility of such action, and only then discovering the sovereign grace of God.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

When Thompson was twelve years old, the church at Licking River that he and his family attended became swept up in the Great Revival of 1800-01. The revival had a profound effect on Thompson, prompting him to even more carefully examine the state of his soul. Before the revival, Thompson had derived some comfort from the Baptist doctrine of an unspecified age of accountability. This doctrine held that children were not held accountable before God for their sins before a certain age, when they came to the knowledge of the full meaning of sin and their actions. He thought his soul was safe because, to his mind, he had not yet come of age. The revival cast doubt in his mind about this, and he writes "my fears became more terrific than ever before." He thought that perhaps "I had been mistaken about the line of accountability, and that I was really accountable for laying down my religion and for all the sins I had committed since." Thompson became convinced that God was angry with him and would not hear his prayers. "If ever I gained [the grace of God] again, it must take a long time, require many prayers, deep repentance, and the performance of many good works . . . so, I hope, a God of mercy would finally be pacified and pardon and accept me."<sup>58</sup> With this Thompson embarked on a pattern of a series of religious practices by which he attempts to work out his own salvation. But such activities did not produce psychic struggles in Thompson as they had in Osbourn and Lawrence. "I soon fancied that God loved me," he remembered, "and had blotted out all my sins. . . . In this perfect state, as I supposed it was, I continued for some time, and had no

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

fears of death, hell, or nay evil, provided I should still continue to do good and abstain from sin.”<sup>59</sup>

Years later, Thompson analyzed this experience as one prompted by an intellectual concern over the state of his soul. He had known, he recalled, no other preaching except for that of the Regular Baptists. Yet by his own nature (pride) he fell into the doctrine of works preached by Armenians, seeking to bring about his salvation by his own efforts instead of relying on the sovereign electing grace of God. Such religious actions as he undertook were prompted by “the terrors of death, fears of hell, and a consciousness of having committed sin.” He describes his system as a “natural system of religion,” one “tried and proved by experience” in his life. “In these exercises I had fully experienced what the Armenian calls religion, and Christian perfection, and falling from grace, and also, the fact of taking my fill of sin when I believed all was safe, as they often say they would do. All these I understand to be a natural system of religion.”<sup>60</sup>

His assurance of salvation resulting from the natural system of religion he was in did not last for long. Thompson recalled the testimonies of several young people, made by them as they came before the church for Baptism and full membership. Thompson listened and, comparing them to his own experiences, decided that they had not been saved and were therefore not true Christians as he was. He was astounded,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

therefore, when these young people were unanimously admitted to full membership.<sup>61</sup> At first Thompson decided that the church had acted against the Scriptural doctrine. On his way home, however, Thompson overheard several older members speak of those young people approvingly as having gone from “law to gospel.” As he pondered these things, Thompson’s mind became open to the possibility that he had been pursuing salvation in an incorrect manner. “I could see nothing like what I called experience, nor Christianity in all they had said. Their prayers, they said, were bad; their hearts were wicked and deceitful; their tears and repentance were not such as were availing; all amounted to nothing for justification, or acceptance with God, and, to wit, they were still not good, but great sinners.”<sup>62</sup> After this, Thompson began to question what he saw as Christian and what his church saw; for he knew both could not be right.

As he sat in church that night, his mind struggled with what it meant to pass from “law to gospel,” and the plan of salvation it seemed to embody. Such musing had upset his previously peaceful assurance. “there was mystery at every point. It was shrouded in darkness, and I could not penetrate it.” He described himself as “a vessel, driven in every direction by warring elements, and could find no safe anchorage or port of rest and safety.” The very sky at sunset seemed to speak of what was at stake for Thompson. It was cloudy, “illuminated with almost incessant flashes of vivid

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 24-26.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

lightning.” Before his eyes, it appeared to him, was portrayed “the power, the majesty and the Glory of God, and the responsibility of man.” He knew now that “my all was at stake; my religion that I so highly valued, which I believed without doubt to be genuine and in which I had so firmly resolved to persevere till death, in full assurance of heaven, was now in positive contrast with that of the church.”<sup>63</sup>

The full meaning of this contrast burst on his conscience with great suddenness. Thompson had gone to the Licking River to observe the baptism of those young people. While observing the ritual, Thompson recalled, “the whole scene changed to me: a dark, heavy, angry, threatening gloom hung over all within my view....The corruption of my nature; the wickedness and deceitfulness of my heart,” all became clear to him. Convinced of his own vileness, Thompson fled the scene of the baptism. He descended into a deep ravine in the woods, fully convinced of his own damnation, in such a state of despair that Thompson felt there was no way for him to achieve salvation.

Later that day, Thompson went with the company of his cousins to a small church near his house. As they walked to the church Thompson recalled them walking up a small rise singing a hymn, a scene which had a sharp impact on Thompson. “I thought that as these Christians were now leaving me behind,” he wrote, “and ascending on their way with singing, so at the last great day they would thus ascend to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

heaven, leaving me to endure the just punishment due me as a sinner.”<sup>64</sup> While they continued on their way, Thompson in his anguish turned his back upon them and walked down to the river. There he came upon a pile of drifted logs under which he hid himself. While there a thought burst into his consciousness which confirmed to him his damned condition. This condemnation drove him to deeper despair, driving him out of his shelter and into the woods. There, “the trees, the birds, all round, seemed to look accusingly upon me....The justice of a righteous and holy God, against whom I had sinned, and who knew all my depravity, still seemed to be before me, like dark stream proceeding from His judgment seat directly against me, pursuing me wherever I went, and pointing downward between my shoulders to my heart.”<sup>65</sup> In the world around him he read signs of god’s judgment. “Although there were only creatures of time, no soul, no intelligence, no accountability,” he wrote, “yet they espoused the cause of their creator, and appeared to look accusingly upon men.”<sup>66</sup>

His entire day and night were consumed with a sense of impending judgment. He had no sleep that night, Thompson recalled, for he reflected on his spiritual condition. “I was a most loathsome mass of pollution, and I knew no way by which I could be cleansed. The darkness of the night seemed to add its shade to the gloom of my feelings.” All these struggles came to a head on Wednesday afternoon when he

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 43.



was wandering in a “wood-lot,” and reflecting on the state of his soul. He came upon a hackberry tree which had been felled. He considered trying to pray in the shelter formed by the tree. But when he tried to, the thought of his unworthiness to pray struck him again. But, he decided, perhaps he could just confess to God that he was just in determining his destruction. So he fell on his knees and confessed himself as a rebel against god, as corrupt and lost.

When I had proceeded thus far, I was arrested by the appearance of a bright, glittering shadow, near my right side, which startled me. I raised my head, and opened my eyes, but could see nothing unusual. I again closed my eyes and resumed my confession, but again the same glittering brightness shone forth with increased brilliancy. I started up again and opened my eyes, but nothing unusual appeared. Again I closed my eyes and resumed as before, and again the brightness, with increased luster, appeared the third time—now with such startling brilliancy that I sprang to my feet, and gazed in every direction. Nothing, however, of that brightness could be seen, but all the heretofore gloomy scene was changed; the angry frown was all dissipated, and the wisdom and goodness of God illuminated the scene, and gave all nature a beauty and grandeur that seemed to show forth more of the glorious majesty of the Creator than I have ever before beheld. . . . I sauntered about, gazing in transports of delight on smiling and instructive nature; and thus I remained gazing, wondering, and adoring that God who seemed almost visible in the works of His power, wisdom and goodness.<sup>67</sup>

What resulted immediately was not unbridled joy but something much more complex. “I concluded that I was now left in a hardened, insensible condition, and that my state was now hardened to feel it. I labored to feel as I had felt, and to see myself

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

again under the load which had heretofore oppressed me; but I could not. Yet I never once thought of this being conversion.”<sup>68</sup>

That same night, while attending a prayer meeting, Thompson felt the presence of the Lord in a way he had not before this time. He speaks of being on his knees in prayer, and there coming upon him “a feeling of enraptured love for God and His people, such as I had never before realized.” The congregational prayer ended in singing. “I looked upon them with admiration, for I thought I had never beheld so lovely a sight; and their voices seemed to me to be tuned with immortality.” Their singing had an inspirited quality which was further attested to by Thompson. “to my mind’s view” the singers “seemed to stand vision like in a majestic line . . . while the glory of God and the beauty of holiness appeared to shine brilliantly around them, and their sweet singing seemed to echo almost into the heavens.”<sup>69</sup> Through various experiences like this, Thompson matured in his knowledge of the Lord. With this came a growing hope of salvation. Yet this was expressed in momentary release from the fears of condemnation that he had. “I could not see it [the grace of God] except in these momentary flashes above described, and they were so sudden and so shrouded in their darkness, that I could not retain a clear conception of it and so I struggled alone.”<sup>70</sup> Even though he was part of a congregation, and had many who could

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 50.

council him about the nature of his experiences and lead him into a fuller knowledge of salvation, Thompson still expressed his experience in terms of a solitary struggle. The only assistance he receives at any point is divinely oriented. Eventually, however, his struggles reach an end and he makes his confession to the church and is baptized.

Lawrence, Osbourn and Thompson recorded in their narratives experiences which provide a sense of the spiritual background out of which the leaders, and possibly the members, of the Primitive Baptists emerged. Their experiences differed markedly in substance from those of the missionary Baptists. The conversions of Bower and Jeter were relatively painless, with the quality of a logical stage of life each went through. The Primitive Baptist conversions recounted in these narratives were filled with struggle, passion, intense emotional pain, and depression. The missionary Baptist narratives have a dispirited quality. God is present, but the divine does not act until Jeter and Bower reach the decision to become converted. He is a gentle and rational deity who does not reveal himself suddenly or miraculously in the world. The God of the Primitive Baptists is an awesome, powerful deity who acts with violence on those he's chosen to make his own. He reveals himself to individuals in visions and other miraculous instances, but also through his creation, in his own time and for his own purposes. The conversion experience in the missionary Baptist narratives is calmed, reasoned, and not marked by great internal transformations. Not so with the Primitive Baptist narratives. At the moment of conversion, each person records not only an internal transformation but a palpable change in the world around them. In the

regeneration and conversion of one sinner, the Primitive Baptist narratives seem to say, comes the regeneration and redemption of fallen creation.

From these narratives we can discover some of the spiritual background which informed the Primitive Baptist's opposition to missions and the new measures. For these leaders of the sect, their conversion experiences were intensely personal between them and God. They had experienced only false assurance and failure when attempting to save themselves outside of God's sovereign grace. No method or human instrument had saved them. It was their direct experience of the divine which had regenerated and converted them. The advocates of the new measures, who spoke of salvation as something the individual sinner could choose freely, who characterized God's grace as an offer to all who would receive it, and who made conversion into a highly public ritual in the institution of the revival meeting, spoke a language of religious experience that had little if any relation to the experiences of those who opposed them. Missions symbolized a way of understanding conversion which was new and foreign to the Primitive Baptists. As much as anything, their opposition to missions was a defense of their own understanding of their salvation experiences.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

The controversy over missions among American Baptists ended by 1840. The denomination had supported home and foreign missions since the late 1810s, and had become an established part of Baptist life by 1840. Controversy still continued within the ranks, however, culminating in the North-South split in 1845 which created the Southern Baptist Convention. Over the next decades the Southern church was rocked by the Landmark controversy. Landmarkism, with its emphasis on the supremacy of the local church body and the apostolicity of Baptist churches, expressed many of the emphases and concerns expressed by the Primitive Baptists in earlier decades. Unlike the latter group, however, the Landmark Baptists as they came to be called never disputed the Scripturalness of missions and other institutions. The Southern Baptist Convention weathered this storm and others. Today, at some fourteen million members, it is the largest Protestant body in the United States. Its missionary force is the largest in the world.

By contrast, the Primitive Baptists remain a small and almost invisible sect in modern America. They are still concentrated in the South, with Alabama, Georgia, and the Appalachian regions having the most Primitive Baptist churches. True to their heritage, they have no central denominational bodies, no seminaries, support no

missionaries, and have no Sunday Schools—thought ironically some Primitive Baptist churches do have home pages on the World Wide Web.

The Primitive Baptists have not participated in the major religious controversies of the last century. There was no split over slavery. The debates over modernism, evolution, higher criticism, biblical inerrancy and ecumenism which have occupied other groups seem not to have troubled the Primitive Baptists. The leaders of their churches preach the same doctrines their predecessors preach. Their hymnals were originally published in nineteenth century. Their confessional statements reaffirm the same doctrines their founders established as the bedrock of their faith. In all, the Primitive Baptists are an intellectual relic of an earlier time.

Part of the reason lies in the very nature of the sect. Because the early leaders saw themselves as defending the true Gospel against apostate groups, they withdrew from contact with non-Primitive Baptist teachers. Their disapproval of formal theological education for their ministers kept them outside of the mainstream of religious debates. When they did get into outside discussions with those who held opposing viewpoints, they continued to use the same terms and debates they had decades earlier. Primitive Baptist theology has undergone no substantial change over the last century. If anything, their views of the doctrines of election and predestination grew more stringent over time.

How then do we evaluate the Primitive Baptists? There is no easy answer to that question. Numerically, they were and continue to be a minor sect on the American religious landscape. Intellectually, they made no substantial contribution to

American theology, save to provide a permanent and safe home for a particular strain of Calvinism. Culturally, they have contributed little except as the subject of studies by anthropologists interested in Southern “plain-folk” religion, especially of the Appalachian variety. Interestingly enough they have contributed politically. The late Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn from Texas was a lifelong Primitive Baptist who was baptized in his nineties. Former Alabama Governor Guy Hunt was a Primitive Baptist preacher who was removed from office for using state aircraft to fly to and from preaching engagements. By any quantitative standard, the Primitive Baptists are deserving of only a footnote in the history of American Christianity.

But the history of a group is not composed of the measurable impact they make on society. The formation of the Primitive Baptist sect was a significant event in the history of early nineteenth century American religion. The leaders and members who followed them out of missionary Baptist churches across the south and west were protesting developments within churches and denominations they saw at variance with Scripture. In doing so they articulated a critique of institutionalization in American Christianity, the move of the evangelical church from protesting to adopting society’s opinions concerning money and social status, and the correct means of saving the lost. In each of these areas they expressed on a popular level the fears of many old-line theologians such as the Old-School Presbyterians. While they differed on many particulars, the Primitive Baptists shared with other conservatives almost identical concerns about the effect the new measures of evangelism would have on the church and its members. The Primitive Baptists, in the end, expressed the fears of many

believers in and out of the Baptist denomination over the direction that American Christianity was taking in the early years of the new republic.



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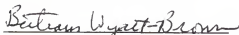
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

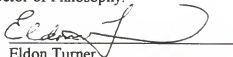
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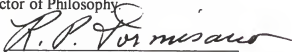
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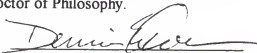
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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of History in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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